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## **The origin, evolution and future of Mek Mulung a state heritage status and beyond**

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**THE ORIGIN, EVOLUTION AND FUTURE OF *MEK MULUNG*:  
A STATE HERITAGE STATUS AND BEYOND**

**Nur Izzati Jamalludin**

**Submitted in fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at King's College London**

**May 2019**

## Abstract

This research was carried out to trace the development of *Mek Mulung*, a dance-drama which is native solely to the village of Wang Tepus, Kedah in peninsular Malaysia. From early records of its original form to its present multiple variations, I examine its evolution in consideration of its current relevance and potential sustainability. The main focus is the interrelationships between the two main performance forms that are currently coexisting, despite their rural and urban distinctiveness, and the impact on them from interactions with various forces within their ecological domains.

Using an applied ethnomusicological approach which develops largely from ethnographic research methodology, data from a variety of sources were gathered over several years of fieldwork involving participant and non-participant observations, interviews, surveys, archival searches, and digital media sources. Informants for the data include tradition bearers in Wang Tepus, performers, concert audiences, performance makers/experts, and the Wang Tepus community.

Results reveal that the urban-based concertized version continues to gain exposure and popularity, but is misunderstood as the ‘real’ *Mek Mulung*. Despite the interest and enjoyment shown by urban audiences, many do not know the origin of *Mek Mulung*. Village-based performances have not taken place for several years, and their absence is giving the impression that it has become relegated in terms of getting credit for the village performers’ ownership of the tradition. Being recognized in 2014 as Kedah state heritage status has given a big boost to *Mek Mulung*’s current popularity among urban audiences,

but unfortunately, the *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus not only has not benefited but has been negatively impacted by it. Outside intervention efforts by researcher-activists may be necessary to empower the village performers towards preserving and sustaining the original tradition, and ultimately to regaining their sense of pride and ownership as the natural bearers of the tradition.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 My encounter with *Mek Mulung*

My first encounter with the phrase “*Mek Mulung*” was in 2007 during my undergraduate program at Universiti Sains Malaysia. I was introduced to it as one form of Malaysian traditional performance in my ‘Introduction to Malaysian Music’ class taught by a notable Malaysian ethnomusicologist, Professor Tan Sooi Beng. This was followed by a further encounter with *Mek Mulung* in my ‘Introduction to Ethnomusicology’ class, again taught by the same professor. I had grown up and attended schools in Alor Setar, the state capital of Kedah. I had taken music as a subject in high school, and never knew approximately thirty kilometers away is Wang Tepus, the home of *Mek Mulung*.

For my undergraduate field work case studies, I chose the *Nobat* (a court music played during certain royal events)<sup>1</sup> and then the *Wayang Kulit Gedek* (shadow puppetry), both having their performance base within the vicinity of Alor Setar, which is more conveniently accessed than Wang Tepus. As a topic for my Bachelor’s degree academic exercise, my interest in aspects of healing in music led me to *Main Puteri*, a performance specially focusing on healing ritual, which is popularly practiced in the east coast state of Kelantan. Through my *gamelan* (a traditional music ensemble) instructor, I was fortunate to establish contact with a *Main Puteri* performer who agreed to become my subject for

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<sup>1</sup> See Glossary of Malay terms in Appendix A.

the study. This required me to travel and conduct my field work in the village of Tumpat in Kelantan more than five hundred kilometers away

It was during my Master's degree program at Universiti Malaya beginning in mid-2009 that I began to give attention to *Mek Mulung*, a performance which has a healing component and that is unique to the village of Wang Tepus in Kedah. A chance encounter with an article by Wong (2008) in the Malaysian Airlines in-flight magazine *Going Places* made me realize that despite very little research had been done, *Mek Mulung* is making its existence known not only locally but also to international readers. That provided me with further encouragement to consider *Mek Mulung* as a possible topic for my Master's research. As a requirement for my Research Methodology class taught by another notable Malaysian ethnomusicologist, Professor Mohd Anis Md Noor, I prepared a hypothetical research proposal for a study on *Mek Mulung*. This was followed by further consultations with Mohd Anis for the possibility of proposing *Mek Mulung* as the topic for my Master's thesis. The research proposal was consequently accepted with Mohd Anis becoming my supervisor. That was my introduction to, and the beginning of a long relationship with Wang Tepus, its *Mek Mulung* tradition, and its tradition bearers/performers.

## **1.2 Background to *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus Village**

*Mek Mulung* is a traditional Malay musical theatre that is unique to the state of Kedah and exclusively performed in the village of Wang Tepus in north-western Kedah, in peninsula Malaysia. (Refer to Figure 1.1 for the location of peninsular Malaysia on the map of Malaysia). *Mek Mulung* is a dance-drama that incorporates dance, music and acting as the core of the performance. Various forms of traditional performing arts practices are known to be identified with the north-western states of Kedah and Perlis in



Figure 1.1: Map of Malaysia.

(Source: <https://maps-malaysia-my.com/outline-map-of-malaysia-with-state-boundaries> . Accessed on 9 May 2019).

Peninsula Malaysia. (Refer to Figure 1.2 for the map of the state of Kedah). These include story-telling (*Awang Batil*), shadow puppetry (*Wayang Kulit Gedek*), different forms of dance (*Terinai, Joget, Hadrah*), theatres (*Mek Mulung, Menora, Mak Yong, Jikey*), and music accompanying martial arts (*Gendang Silat*). Despite sharing some common characteristics as a result of interactions among the participants as well as factors related to their historical origins, each has its own distinct characteristics (Madiha & Quayum, 2010; Matusky & Chopyak, 2008; Mohd Ghouse, 1992)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Malay authors are referred according to their first name.





*Mek Mulung* is considered to be among the earliest forms of traditional musical theatre in Kedah, alongside others which are generally better known, such as the *Menora*, *Mak Yong*, *Wayang Kulit*, *Hadrah*, and *Jikey* (Shazryn, 2010). It is still practiced in Wang Tepus in its traditional form dating back to several generations and is not known to exist elsewhere (Ahmad, 1976; Ku Zam Zam, 1979; Mohamad Luthfi, 2011; Mohd Ghouse, 1995, 2015; Mohd Ibrahim, 1996; Wong, 2008; Zinnitulniza, 2014). (Refer to Figure 1.3 for the location of *kampung* Wang Tepus in Kedah).

In 2014, *Mek Mulung* was given recognition by the Kedah state government as “traditional arts heritage”. Although the state has many other performing arts forms, *Mek Mulung* was accorded state heritage status in consideration that its performance is unique to Kedah. *Mek Mulung* can be distinguished from other forms of traditional musical theatre by its distinctive music, although there have been suggestions that there are influences from *Mak Yong* (Madiha & Quayum, 2010; Rahmah, 1979) and *Menora* (Jusoh, 1971). Perhaps it is not surprising since *Mak Yong*, *Mek Mulung*, and *Menora* have Thai origins (Madiha & Quayum, 2010; Rahmah, 1979). The unique characteristics of the *Mek Mulung* performance are its instrumental music and singing style which incorporates elements of dancing, comedy, and drama/dialogues. The music ensemble consists of four frame drums. Two large frame drums called *gendang ibu* and two smaller frame drums called *gendang anak* and *semborong*. The two smaller drums have different hide thickness. Time keeper instruments include several pairs of bamboo concussion clappers called *kecerek*, and a suspended knobbed gong. A free reed oboe called the *serunai* plays the melody in the instrumental pieces. (Refer to discussion in section 2.6.4 in Chapter Two). A single story selected from a standard repertoire is performed by the actors and dancers in a performance that can last for up to six hours in a night.

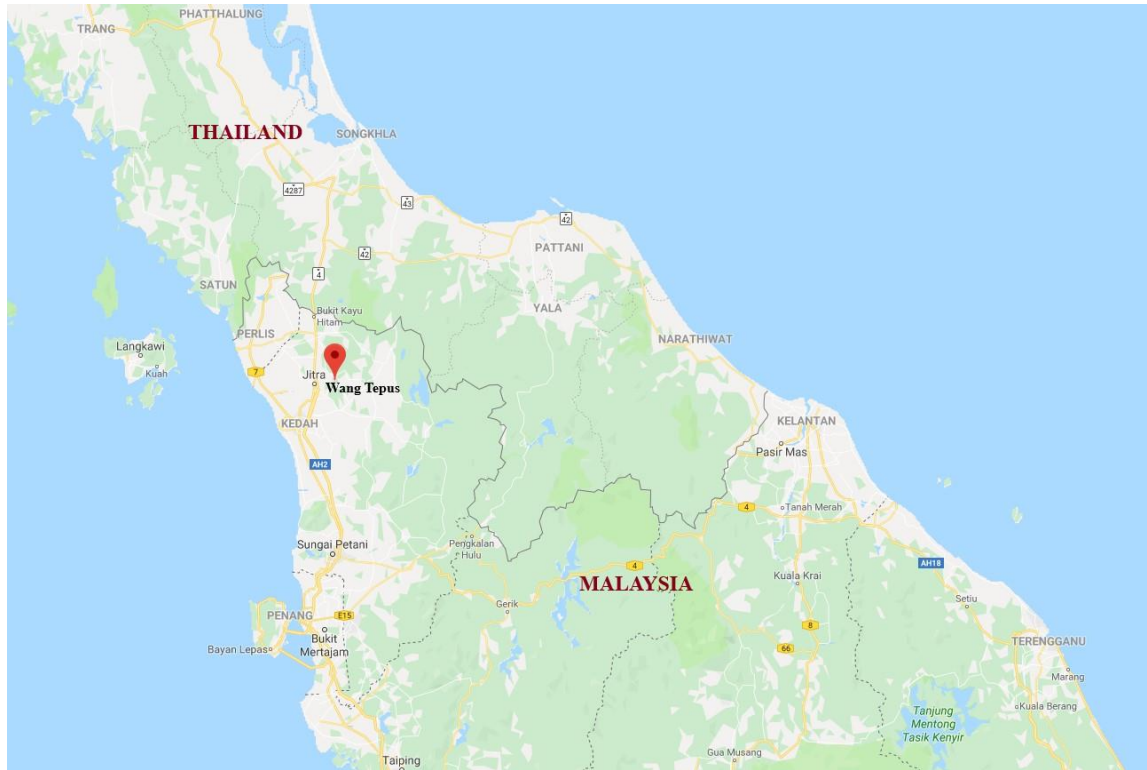


Figure 1.3: Location of Kampung Wang Tepus in Kedah.

(Source:

<https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Wang+Tepus,+Jitra,+Kedah,+Malaysia/@6.2477198,100.5400659,8.75z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x304b57acb9bf66db:0x2263158ecbeaf9b!8m2!3d6.2699762!4d100.4958678>. Accessed 9 May 2019).

*Mek Mulung* used to be a popular form of entertainment for the rural community of northern Kedah, much more widely than the village alone. The performers travelled outside of their base in *kampung* Wang Tepus to fulfil invitations from individuals or groups to present their performances for celebrating various occasions, rites of passage such as weddings, circumcisions and also ritual performances. (See Figures 1.4 and 1.5 for the location of *kampung* Wang Tepus in relation to Alor Setar, the capital city of Kedah).



Figure 1.4: Highway from Alor Setar leading to Wang Tepus exit. Photograph taken by the author.

One key ritual performance associated with *Mek Mulung* is the annual *Sembah Guru* ritual. This is a lively performance which can last for a couple of days, and that brings the village community together to celebrate the event, before ending with a big feast on the last day. However, the frequency of *Mek Mulung* performances in Wang Tepus village has severely declined over recent years due to various social, cultural, and economic factors impacting on the village and its population. *Mek Mulung* has been unable to retain its entertainment function for the village community with the availability of various mediated forms of entertainment that have become easily accessible from their



Figure 1.5: Location of Wang Tepus in relation to Alor Setar, Kedah.

(Source:

<https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Wang+Tepus,+Jitra,+Kedah,+Malaysia/@6.2477198,100.5400659,8.75z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x304b57acb9bf66db:0x2263158ecbeaf9b!8m2!3d6.2699762!4d100.4958678>. Accessed on 9 May 2019).

village. Without a clear and systematic transmission process and little interest shown by the current younger generation to acquire the requisite performing skills, or participate in staging the performance, the *Mek Mulung* tradition in the village is facing difficulties sustaining itself, and is slowly disappearing from the village.



### 1.3 Statement of Central Problem

It is only in the past three decades that *Mek Mulung* has become a subject of research inquiry at all, and currently there is a scarcity of systematic studies and comprehensive documentation of *Mek Mulung*. Lacking any clear evidence to support villagers' contentions about its origins, various versions have been proposed with regard to its origin and historical background, how it has evolved, its current state, and the likelihood that it will soon become extinct. A search of earlier literature on *Mek Mulung* shows that writings have largely dealt with assumptions about its possible historical beginnings and descriptions of contents of its traditional performance, such as the components of singing, dancing, and acting (Ahmad, 1976; Ghulam-Sarwar, 1994; Mohamad Luthfi, 2011; Mohamad Nazri, 1998; Mohd Ghazali, 1995; Mohd Ghouse, 1992, 2003; Omar, 1973; Siti Fatimah, 2009; Zinnitulniza, 2014). Specific focus has been given to the instruments and music used (Toh, 2006) and its ritual and healing aspects (Mohamad Luthfi, 2011; Zinnitulniza, 2014). Additional literature in various print and electronic media includes reviews of what I shall refer to as 'concertized' *Mek Mulung* performances in the urban context (Amirul, 2011, 2012; Aref, 2007; Chua, 2010; Mohd Ghouse, 2015; Mohd Ibrahim, 1996; Suhaimi, 2008).

The latter group of media accounts has generated more recent interest in *Mek Mulung* and has raised issues that form the central tension of my thesis concerning the staging of concertized versions of *Mek Mulung* in urban settings as an effort towards its revival. A study that I carried out for my Master's dissertation in 2014 examined how certain musical components and the performance structure of *Mek Mulung* changed when it was transported from the traditional village performance to concert performances in urban concert halls. My initial results, which have been deepened in the course of my

doctoral thesis, revealed that these performances represented two different versions of *Mek Mulung* (Nur Izzati, 2014). These two versions are the “concertized” and the traditional village performances. This conclusion has since been supported in a review of a *Mek Mulung* performance by a noted scholar who expressed a similar opinion (Mohd Ghouse, 2015).

As with other forms of traditional Malay theatre, the *Mek Mulung* tradition is not preserved in a written script, but is handed down orally from one generation to another. Ever since its beginnings, *Mek Mulung* has been performed by a single group of performers from the same family lineage whose ancestors originally introduced the tradition. The current generation of hereditary practitioners, who are getting old with few of their young family members showing interest in continuing the tradition, are concerned that without proper transmission efforts and lack of enthusiasm amongst the younger generation, the tradition would slowly disappear and become extinct. This thesis aims to provide a systematic and comprehensive study of this unique traditional dance-drama, in both its village and urban contexts, and especially to consider how *Mek Mulung* has managed to survive, at the same time as sadly and slowly heading towards extinction in its original form. It also has an applied aim, to provide policy suggestions for sustaining it into the future.

#### **1.4 Purpose of the Study**

As noted in the foregoing discussion in section 1.2 above, so far little work has been done on *Mek Mulung* in academia beyond describing its performance characteristics, whether in the village or the concertized versions. My study is particularly timely in view of the situation that these few elderly performers are still around and available to be

consulted for their views and knowledge, which I have complemented with data from other sources so as to come up with a more complete picture of the current state of the *Mek Mulung* performance tradition.

The purpose of my study is to first investigate the development of the *Mek Mulung* tradition from its early records up to its present status, and then to understand its contemporary place locally, in the state, and nationally, in terms of its current relevancy, with a view to ascertaining its future sustainability. In tracing *Mek Mulung*'s history, I have identified and explained changes to various aspects of the performance and examined factors that could have been influential in shaping the dance-drama into the form it is today. Most critically, alongside the traditional form, a modern version has developed over the past fifteen to twenty years for presentation to urban audiences.

In the early 2000s, the Petronas Performing Arts Group (henceforth PPAG)<sup>3</sup>, a group of professional performers based in Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur, approached the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* troupe for consultation and training their members to reconstruct a *Mek Mulung* performance for presentation to urban audiences. (See Appendix B for a List of Acronyms). A new and modern *Mek Mulung* was thus born, and began to find its niche in the urban performing arts scene. Another turning point occurred in 2014 when the Kedah state government declared *Mek Mulung* as a state traditional arts heritage (as mentioned in section 1.1 earlier). While all this was occurring outside of Wang Tepus, the custodians of the *Mek Mulung* tradition themselves were faced with serious challenges in their efforts to stay relevant and ensure the continuity and survival of the tradition. At the *kampung* (village) level, vanishingly few of the *Mek Mulung* events

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<sup>3</sup> The Petronas Performing Arts Group (PPAG) is a professional performing arts group established in 1990 under the auspices of the Petronas Group, a national oil and gas company. The group started as a staff club whose members were passionate about the arts which eventually operated as a separate entity which hired professional dancers, directors, and a creative team. The PPAG remained active until its demise on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2012.



taking place outside Wang Tepus have actually contributed to its sustainability or cultural potential in the village context. For this reason, my study not only focusses on *Mek Mulung* within its Wang Tepus village context, but also the impact of and its relationship with the urban concertized version and its performers and audiences. The question remains: will the traditional village-based *Mek Mulung* be able to survive and continue to be relevant simultaneously with the modern version?

### 1.5 Research Questions

A major question that is addressed in this study was what and how significant social, cultural, economic, and political background factors that have impeded and continue to impede on the origin, shaping, of *Mek Mulung* and potentially its future prospects.

The research was guided by the following questions:

1. How can archival materials position *Mek Mulung* in the past and explain its current development?
2. What are the external and internal factors that have and continue to impede the sustainability of the performance in *kampung* Wang Tepus?
3. How does the urban performance impact upon the performance of the village version (and vice versa)?
4. What aspects of the traditional performance must be retained and what can be compromised so that the traditional practitioners still consider it as a *Mek Mulung* performance?
5. What are the ways *Mek Mulung* might springboard ongoing development?

6. What are the challenges faced by various *Mek Mulung* practitioners, researchers and organizations in efforts to improve the sustainability of *Mek Mulung*?
7. How can contemporary and hybrid art forms impact *Mek Mulung* more positively in the long run?

## **1.6 Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of the study is to trace and identify factors that have contributed to the evolution of the *Mek Mulung* tradition. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the current state of the *Mek Mulung* performance.
2. To investigate the performance developments and changes that have brought *Mek Mulung* to its current form.
3. To ascertain the response of the custodians of the *Mek Mulung* tradition towards the modern version.
4. To investigate the extent of audience understanding and acceptance of both the traditional and concertized versions of *Mek Mulung*.
5. To determine sustainable measures to promote *Mek Mulung* and eventually provide solutions to preserve endangered performing arts cultures as a whole, specifically oral group traditions existing as an exclusive, small, and single-group troupe.

## 1.7 Methodology of the Study

An applied ethnomusicological research approach (Harrison, 2012, 2014; Pettan, 2010; Sheehy, 1992; Tan, 2015) was carried out largely utilizing concepts of ethnographic inquiry. My study relies heavily on fieldwork and personal experiences with the practitioners, and archival materials undertaken at intervals over several years, beginning when I was preparing my Masters' dissertation and continuing up to the point of writing this thesis. This study uses a "qualitative-driven mixed method" (Hall & Ryan, 2011 citing Creswell et al., 2006), in which I combine a variety of data collection methods to gather relevant information from a variety of sources so as to gain a more comprehensive understanding of *Mek Mulung*'s development and current status, and the consequent implications of this within and outside of Wang Tepus. Fieldwork involves gathering primary data which includes participant-observations with performers and audiences, interviews, and archival searches for relevant historical documents and artefacts in archives, museums, and libraries. A questionnaire was developed for a survey of audience responses to gather supporting quantitative data. Transcriptions of raw footages of video and audio recordings of past *Mek Mulung* performances and interview sessions serve as secondary data. I incorporated analyses of newly produced media to serve as complementary data. Altogether this assembly of methods, involving the gathering of data from various perspectives, provides a creative research design (Kara, 2015; Wiles, Crow & Pain, 2011) in which data triangulation can be sufficiently achieved. The sources of data and data collection methods are shown in Figure 1.6.

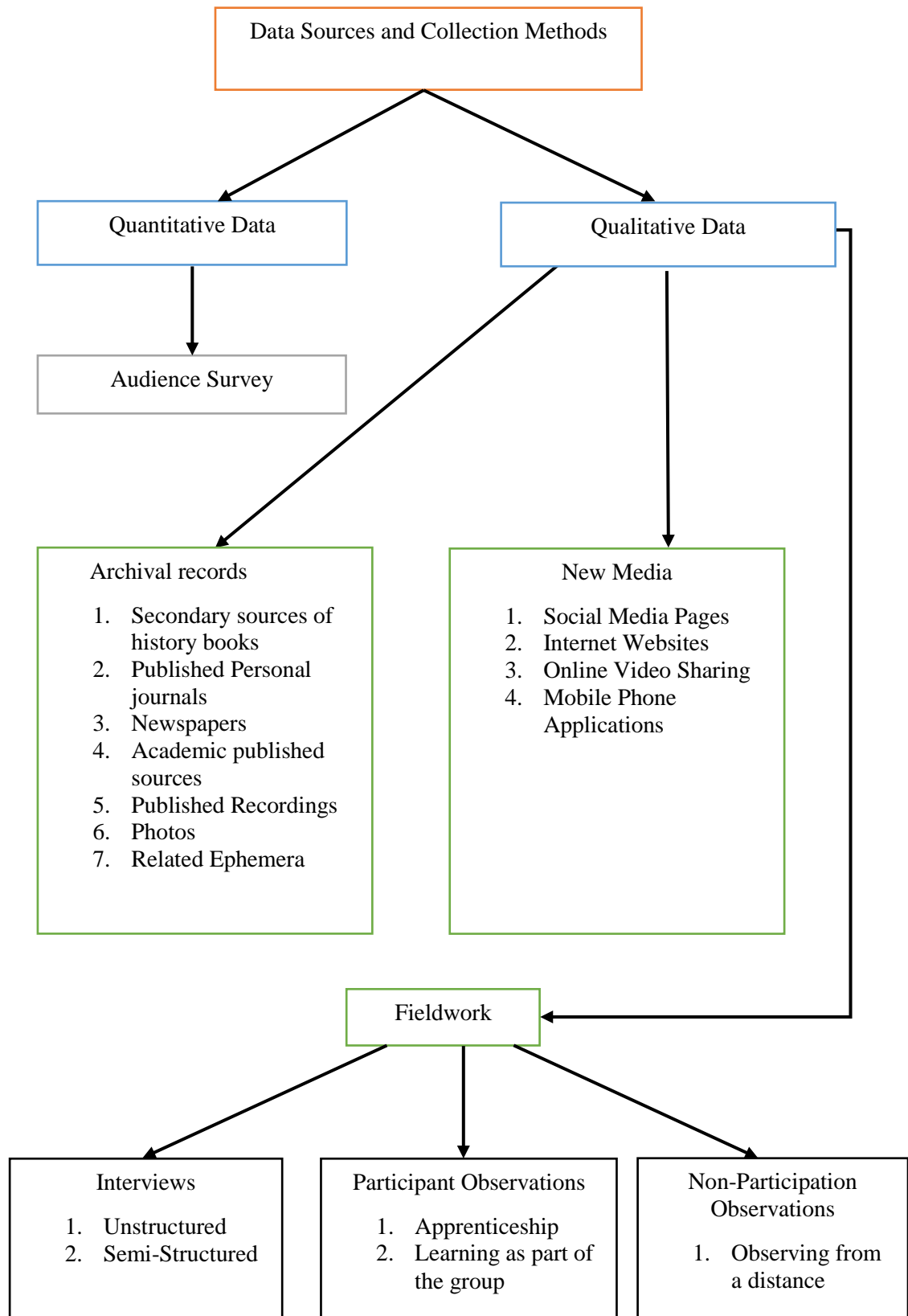


Figure 1.6: Data sources and collection methods

### 1.7.1 Interviews

I conducted a series of semi-structured and unstructured interviews informally with practitioners and villagers of Wang Tepus, usually over casual meals or in arranged meetings. I interviewed the practitioners mostly in their own homes in the presence of other family members or close acquaintances. Those with other village informants mostly took place in neutral environments in the village, such as outdoor spaces within the vicinity of their homes, gathering spots in the neighborhood, or suitable stops along roads and footpaths in the village.

Interview sessions with practitioners in their homes were mostly conducted in a group which normally included family members such as interviewees' spouses and their children, and neighborhood friends. The presence of these close family members and friends were very helpful in verifying or correcting certain incidents described by the informants during conversations. Each interview session usually lasted between one to four hours, which could involve conversations switching from large group to small groups, or vice versa, as people came and went and the dynamics of the group changed. I also conducted one-on-one personal, or small-group, interviews especially involving urban informants from among audiences of the concertized *Mek Mulung* performances and former PPAG performers in Kuala Lumpur. Interviews were conducted with audiences who attended the final PPAG performance of *Cahaya Bulan* at Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur – DBKL (Kuala Lumpur City Hall) on 18 December 2011, and the Darinai Dance Company's *Puteri Dua Belas Beradik* at the Malaysian Tourism Center (MaTiC) Kuala Lumpur on 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> August 2018.

My selection of interview informants was largely based on their level of influence in the tradition, especially with regard to those in Wang Tepus, and to a lesser extent their

availability. I referred to several key players in the *Mek Mulung* troupe in Wang Tepus before making contacts with other respondents. More specifically, Saad bin Taib (henceforth Pak Saad) and Ahmad Shahadan (henceforth Abang Mat) played a key role as my interlocutors and as centres of informant networks, because they are the senior-most holders of the current Wang Tepus tradition. Also important were other troupe members, such as ritual specialists, musicians, and the dancers. Some of the informants held limited information about the tradition and performance as a whole, because their roles were restricted to a specific part in the performance. For instance, the drummers with specialty in performing their drum patterns tended to have very little information about the myths and other aspects of the performance; but they provided other more general information which contributed their perspectives on the changes that had taken place throughout their lives, and how they had been impacted by these experiences. Randomly selected villagers whom I met by chance during my walkabouts in the village provided useful outsiders' views on the *Mek Mulung* tradition as a whole.

Urban performers provided interview data from the perspectives of those who had experiences or some form of association with the concertized *Mek Mulung* performance, including former dancers from PPAG and AKRAB<sup>4</sup> and their respective artistic directors, university student performers and their tutors, and members of the audiences.

### **1.7.2 Participant and Non-Participant Observations**

To understand further from a personal perspective the embodiment of the *Mek Mulung* performance, I became a participant in some aspects of making *Mek Mulung*. In

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<sup>4</sup> AKRAB refers to Persatuan Penggerak Warisan Budaya, a Kedah-based youth theatre group that performs multi-genre theatre performances. AKRAB performances have often previously collaborated with Kedah state JKKN to perform at various functions and events. They also participate in interstate theatre competitions.

2010 and 2011, I took weekly classes alongside students who were enrolled in a class offering a *Mek Mulung* module at ASWARA<sup>5</sup>, mostly learning the music aspects of *Mek Mulung* performance. While conducting my doctoral research, I had several sessions learning to play the *serunai* (a free-reed oboe) with one of the Wang Tepus performers and his son. Through this process, I learned on a practical basis the circular breathing method which is quite difficult for the performer to verbalize in the teaching process.

During the recent staging of an urban *Mek Mulung* performance, 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> August 2018, I participated as a replacement for a key drum player who had to withdraw from performing at the last minute to attend to a death in the family. My exposure and ability to play the repertoire during the lessons I had over my time in the field, and especially at ASWARA, enabled me to participate fully as a member of the music ensemble. From this experience of playing alongside them, I was able to engage more deeply with the urban performers, as well as some performers from Wang Tepus who were part of the ensemble.

I also engaged in many non-participant observations, which took place during performances by the *Mek Mulung* troupe in Wang Tepus, and student performances at Universiti Malaya and SUNWAY University. As a non-participant observer, I could consider the outsider's view of aspects of *Mek Mulung* in the process of its preparation for making a performance as well as the dynamics involved in staging the performance. During the process of thinking through moments of participation and non-participation, I became aware and was able to understand minor discrepancies between methods of teaching and learning *Mek Mulung* and how the knowledge is transferred to the performance.

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<sup>5</sup> ASWARA refers to Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage).

### **1.7.3 Archival Data**

*Mek Mulung* has few documented sources. Most of my information about the tradition has been gathered over the years through oral transmission. Archival data provide additional and complementary supporting sources which give further insights into how the performance is perceived during different generations. Elite secondary sources, such as academic books and journals, provide the base for this part of the research. I also collected and reviewed additional archival materials from libraries, archives, museums, and individuals and organizations which include newspaper articles, personal collections of audio and video recordings, published recordings, collections of personal photographs, and other related non-academic materials which add value to the fieldwork data. Archival materials also help to give me a clearer understanding of what the general public might know and understand (or misunderstand) about *Mek Mulung*.

### **1.7.4 New Media**

A vast amount of new source of data have made their appearance in the form of new digital media, which I used when I find them appropriate for inclusion in this study, to add to the data already collected from other more conventional sources. I found useful information on different aspects of *Mek Mulung* from a range of sources such as social media platforms, mobile phone applications, and video sharing websites. This also gives insight into the extent to which new media are and may be utilized to disperse information on *Mek Mulung*, making it accessible to much wider potential audiences. Responses, comments, and feedback available on these new media sources also supply a ready-made assemblage resembling a general study of markets and trends in *Mek Mulung* reception from different audiences.



### **1.7.5 Survey Questionnaire**

A survey of audiences' responses towards *Mek Mulung* in general, and to one particular performance, which I gathered through a questionnaire provide some quantitative data for this study. I distributed the questionnaires during a performance of *Mek Mulung Dewa Kaca* staged by students of Universiti Malaya at the Experimental Theatre on two consecutive nights, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> December 2016. I approached members of the audience at random before the performance started, and gave them the questionnaire if they agreed to participate. Questionnaires were collected at the end of the show. The questionnaire is presented in Appendix C.

### **1.7.6 Informal Personal Communication**

Informal personal communication (as opposed to more formal interviews, etc.) with certain key informants provide valuable information for this research. Regular and frequent communications with Zamzuriah Zahari and Kamarul Baisah Hussin, both academicians at ASWARA, who are performers themselves, kept me updated with *Mek Mulung* activities. They were also available if I needed information and further clarification on issues relating to data provided by them. Other personal communications include casual conversations with Wang Tepus performers, villagers whom I met and chatted with while walking about the village, and also personal accounts volunteered by various people when I talked to them about my research, including local researchers and personnel from different government and non-government agencies. These conversations were not pre-planned, but topics that came into such casual conversations provide important information for the study. Such conversations frequently happened in between

interviews or before and after performances, or sometimes were sent through text messages or conveyed via phone conversations.

### **1.7.7 Transcription of Raw Data from Personal Collections**

Zamzuriah's personal collection of interviews and other media related to *Mek Mulung* also proves exceptionally valuable to this study, and I am especially grateful to her for willingly sharing this material with me, knowing that it would be used for my research on *Mek Mulung*. These sets of raw data are in the form of interviews which Zamzuriah conducted at many different times in 2009 with key Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* troupe members: the late Salleh bin Embut (henceforth Pak Leh), Pak Saad, and Abang Mat. I did all the transcriptions, and they provide data that help to fill some gaps in my analyses, especially important information provided by Pak Leh before he passed on. Another set of raw data of interviews between Zamzuriah and Pak Saad conducted in April 2018 was also made available to me in time for me to include them in this research.

## **1.8 Review of the Literature**

A comprehensive knowledge of the progression of the *Mek Mulung* tradition requires a review of literature encompassing ethnography intersecting with anthropology, cultural studies, ethnomusicology, Southeast Asian Studies, rural and agricultural studies, and Malay studies. Discussion in this section is divided into three sub-sections. In the first sub-section I examine issues relating to the formation of traditions, elements that are of importance to a tradition, and factors leading to its decline. The second part discusses the process of transformation from rural presentation to urban staging. This encompasses concepts of reconstruction, adaptation, revival, and cultural heritage. In the third section,

I discuss the concertized performance and its implications, from the perspectives of changes in meaning, what it represents, understanding of the performance itself, and what impacts it has on the culture bearers themselves.

### **1.8.1 Traditions, Culture, and the Rural Malay Village Dynamics**

I begin this section by looking at what constitutes a traditional performing arts practice and its importance to the community. According to Edward Shils (1981), tradition can mean many things. In its most elementary (and not uncontested) sense, it refers to “anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present” (p. 12). Taking from the Latin word *traditum*, the conception of tradition makes no specific mention of what is passed down, in what manner it is passed down, how long it has been passed down, and in what form it is passed down. There is also no mention of the processes that are involved in its creation, presentation, and reception. Likewise, it is also silent in terms of whether it is necessary to provide evidence in order to establish its validity. However, key to making decisions as to whether something is conceived as a tradition or not, is that it is the result of human creation which involves thought and imagination, and which is then handed down from one generation to the next. In terms of what would constitute tradition, Shils states that it “includes material objects, beliefs about all sorts of things, images of persons and events, practices and institutions”. It does not only refer to those that were created, performed, or believed in the past, but also those that are believed to have existed, have been performed or believed in the past (1981, pp. 12–13). With regard to the substantive content of tradition, Shils sees it as:

All accomplished patterns of the human mind, all patterns of belief or modes of thinking, all achieved patterns of social relationships, all technical practices, and all physical artefacts or natural objects are

susceptible to becoming objects in a process of transmission; each is capable of becoming a tradition. (1981, p. 16)

There is no precise pattern of duration for something to be considered as a tradition because it cannot be measured in terms of specific number of years. The time boundaries are vague because the general rule is that the chain of tradition should consist of at least two transmissions which last over three generations, irrespective of their total span of time, however long or short it may be (Shils, p. 15). Thus, regardless of its substance or institutional setting, the characteristic feature of tradition is its persistence and recurrence through transmission. Shils' authority on the concept of tradition is acknowledged by Phillips (2004) who states that:

A few studies do exist, but considering the importance of the idea, scholarly analyses of the history and present meaning of the concept of tradition remain remarkably few... Two decades after the publication of Shils's book, the situation is not remarkably different. (p. 3)

In view of Shils' concept of tradition, *Mek Mulung* is indeed a tradition: it is believed to have existed for more than 400 years, and it has been transmitted through a hereditary lineage encompassing at least six generations (Zinnituniza, 2014). *Mek Mulung* also meets other criteria put forward by Shils for it to be considered as a "genuine tradition": namely, it is transmitted orally and by example rather than in writing; its emergence has been largely based on hearsay rather than established facts; its originator(s) is(are) anonymous because there is no individual(s) who could be identified as such; the current recipients of the tradition do not have in their possession information or documentation to verify their origin and lineage; and these custodians/beholders believe that they are presenting the true form of the tradition in their performance.

Traditions became a point in academic discussion with modern advancements. James Clifford (2004) points out that “the western idea of tradition, or at least since the early-modern period, has typically been opposed to notions like progress, science, rationality, modernization, development and now globalization” (p. 152). Clifford further talks of a newly complex view of tradition as being “inseparable from the decentering, the wavering, of its binary term ‘modernity’” (p. 153). Um (2013), on the other hand, cites Arato and Cohen’s (1988) discussion of modernity in shaping how traditions are reproduced and selected, and thus modernity being a reinforcer rather than a destroyer of traditions, a view which is also shared by Fornas (1995). Similarly, Ronstrom cites Eriksen (1993) who sees tradition as “springboards for cultural change”, and concludes that “if tradition is created by modernity, the opposite also must be true: that modernity is created by tradition. It is by using the ideas about tradition as context that modernity emerges as text” (2016, p. 56).

The study of the tradition as a ritual component that constitutes the importance of *Mek Mulung* within the community similarly conforms with Victor Turner’s 1969 proposal of a three-part sequence in a ritual progression: (1) separation from the everyday flow of activities, involving a passage through a threshold state or *limen* into a ritual world removed from everyday notions of time and space; (2) a mimetic enactment of some dimension of the crisis that brought about the separation, in the course of which enactment the structures of everyday life are both elaborated and challenged (he called the co-occurrence of these motives “structure” and “anti-structure”); and (3) a re-entry into the everyday world. According to Abrahams (1969), Turner sees the mimetic phase as the most important for the community, “for here the all-important confrontation of everyday norms took place through socially subversive and ritually inversive acts” (p. ix).

Through his tripartite processual scheme of separation, liminality, and reintegration, Turner (1969) recognizes the structural similarities of rites of elevation, initiation, healing, incorporation, and transience. With reference to *Mek Mulung*, Turner's most appropriate discussion concerns calendric rites which:

almost always refer to large groups and quite often embrace whole societies. Often, too, they are performed at well-delineated points in the annual productive cycle, and attest to the passage from scarcity to plenty (as at first fruits or harvest festivals) or from plenty to scarcity (as when the hardships of winter are anticipated and magically warded against). To these also one should add all *rite de passage*, which accompany change of a collective sort from one state to another, as when a whole tribe goes to war, or a large local community performs ritual to reverse the effects of famine, drought, or plague. (1969, p. 169)

It would seem that Turner's description of calendric rites is applicable to *Mek Mulung* in its *kampung* and agricultural context, and how changes can impact on the villagers' livelihood.

Two other concepts—custom and convention or routine—are also appropriate to point out at this juncture in discussing what constitutes a tradition in relation to *Mek Mulung*. Hobsbawm (2012) sees the need to clearly distinguish tradition from custom which he suggests dominates “traditional” societies. The object and characteristic of traditions, according to Hobsbawm, is invariant whereby the past which tradition refers to imposes fixed practices, for instance in the form of repetition. Nevertheless, custom has to accommodate to change and innovation up to a certain point while still retaining its commitment to appear compatible or even identical to a precedent. A custom is likened to an action, while a tradition to “ritualized practices surrounding their substantial action” (p. 3). On the other hand, conventions or routines which have no significant ritual or

symbolic function as in traditions, may acquire it incidentally, when certain social practices need to be repeatedly carried out. These are needed for convenience and efficiency in facilitating certain practices, but are readily abandoned to meet changing needs.

Characteristic features of tradition and those that differentiate it from other concepts such as custom and conventions or routines are useful to identifying a tradition. However, it can be very helpful if certain concepts which are thought *not* to belong to the category of tradition can also be recognized and discarded as such. Shils provides further elaboration on what is not considered a tradition. Among them are: an experienced sentiment, a rational judgement, an action as in the movement of the body, a visual perception, a prayer, a scientific proposition, a process of industrial production, an act of exercise of authority, and a performance of a ritual action. Nevertheless, each of them can in various ways be transmitted as a tradition, and end up as traditions. According to Shils, “(t)hey nearly always occur in the forms affected or determined in varying degrees by tradition. They recur because they are carried as traditions which are re-enacted. The re-enactment is not the tradition; the tradition is the pattern which guides the re-enactment” (1981, p. 31).

Once a tradition has established itself, what motivates it to persist? According to Shils, “the fact that such things already existed and “worked”, human beings were often knowingly respectful towards the things which they had inherited from the past and they guided their behaviour accordingly” (1981, p. 20). Continued satisfaction with the tradition assures continued acceptance of the tradition by the beholders because it meets their needs. In spite of its irrelevancy to those who do not possess the tradition, the desire to continue to retain it by those in possession of it is a consequence of their perception that

they cannot survive without it. It is difficult for the holders to envision their daily life in the absence of the tradition.

Conversely a tradition will not be able to sustain itself if it does not work and/or if it continuously brings negative impact upon those who practice it. There are several reasons that contribute to the decline of a tradition. External forces that have affected Southeast Asia performing arts include the loss of patronage (Ida Wayan, 2001), political instability and war (Cerribašić, 2016; Kallio & Westerlund, 2016), natural disasters (Kartomi, 2016) and also restrictions and censorship (Hardwick, 2013). Apart from such external events, Nur Izzati (2014) cites Ghulam-Sarwar's (2008, 2009) seven key factors that frequently contribute to the decline of an art form in Southeast Asia, especially if they occur simultaneously at a given time. These are:

(a) migration of rural population to urban areas, (b) increase in the level of education and consequently changing the tastes among the masses, (c) rise in orthodox Islamists who view performing arts with suspicion arising from the contention that traditional Malay theatre consists of pre-Islamic and animistic elements, (d) developments in modern media and the popularity of foreign films and television programs, (e) government policies and authorities that do not support, and in some cases prohibit the promotion of traditional performing arts, (f) decline in number of existing practitioners/performers and the lack of a new generation of practitioners/performers as they cannot depend on the traditional art forms as a viable source of livelihood, and (g) lack of opportunities for watching performances and thus having minimal exposure to their own cultural art forms. (Nur Izzati, 2014, pp. 12-13)

To date, it has been a strong belief in the need to continue the tradition to ensure villagers' ritual safety that has enabled the continuity of the *Mek Mulung* tradition and avoided it becoming obsolete thus far. The culture of paying homage and showing respect to significant figures such as teachers and respectable elders also still holds a prominent



place among communities in southern Thailand, as well as northern Malaysia, which has been inherited from Hindu-Buddhist religious traditions. Such rituals can be observed in performances like the *Muai Thai* (a form of Thai boxing) and the *Menora* in Thailand, as well as in parts of the states of Kedah and Kelantan in the north and northeast of peninsular Malaysia which share their borders with Thailand (Ghulam-Sarwar, 1992; Miller, 2002).

Changes to tradition are inevitable and can occur throughout the transmission process from one generation to another. According to Shils, “traditions change because they are never good enough for some of those who have received them” (1981, p. 213). These changes can occur as a result of internal forces which originate from the tradition itself and undertaken by those who have accepted it. There are no external forces which compel the changes to take place. Shils refers to these as changes resulting from endogenous factors which are motivated by the belief that these changes would bring improvements to the tradition. At the same time, changes can take place in response to changed circumstances which demand the bearers to make adaptations to the tradition. Shils refers to these changes as resulting from exogenous factors in the form of newly presented traditions, or traditions which are previously unknown but have been in existence and well developed in alien or remote societies (1981, p. 213). In contrast to endogenous factors, exogenous factors involve some form of force being exerted on the traditions to make the necessary changes.

In Wang Tepus today, with greater access to educational opportunities, current performers are more literate than their forefathers. They are able to learn the songs and dance movements in the *Mek Mulung* repertoire through notation. Thus, *Mek Mulung* which is originally an oral tradition is in some ways evolving into a part-written tradition. Chan’s (2015) study of the *Main Jo’oh* music and dance of the indigenous *Mah Meri* of

Malaysia discusses the significant changes which developed in the costumes worn by the female *Mah Meri* performers, an endogenous factor since it was initiated among the performers themselves. The change was carried out in stages with the objective of presenting to the urban audience a more “exotic” and “native-like” attire. Skirts made from woven *nipa* leaves and later tunics made from bark of the *terap* tree have replaced the *kebaya* top and batik *sarung* which had long been the traditional attire when performing to celebrate various events within the *Mah Meri* community.

Various laws and regulations imposed by the state government, for example, in Kelantan, the north-eastern state in peninsular Malaysia, on traditional performing arts can also be categorized as exogenous factors. *Mak Yong*, a Malay dance drama, whose performance has been deemed un-Islamic by the religious authorities in Kelantan, has recently been officially banned from being performed in the state (Hardwick, 2013). Even though it was then declared by UNESCO as an Intangible Heritage, and consequently the ban finally lifted, it has not achieved the popularity it once enjoyed. The damage has been done; and with the declining rate of performances, it currently faces the possibility of extinction. The *Wayang Kulit*, a shadow puppet performance largely performed in Kelantan, was given approval, but with strict guidelines on the manner in which it is to be presented to the public (Ab Aziz & Raja Iskandar, 2011; Brennan, 2001). One particular *Wayang Kulit* performance in Kedah had to change its original content to accommodate suggestions made by the state authorities to insert official messages to be relayed to the public (Osnes, 1992).

To date, *Mek Mulung* performances have not faced any form of external restrictions which require it to make changes in its performance, or the need for syncretisation in order to continue to stay relevant. However, changes in social and

economic conditions have put limitations on the frequency and the felt need for *Mek Mulung* performances. It is no longer a popular choice as a form of entertainment for celebrating social events like weddings; nor is it a popular pastime activity during periods between rice planting and harvesting season. In terms of meeting economic needs, being a member of the performance troupe is no longer a viable means to generate additional income. Apart from the obligatory annual *Sembah Guru* performances, *Mek Mulung* in its traditional village version is now performed mostly to meet requests from outside sources during cultural festivals and celebrations or for research and documentation purposes.

The power dynamics within rural Malay Kedah peasant communities in the past need also to be considered in order to understand the social structures within Wang Tepus. Rural Malays, as in Wang Tepus, rely on agricultural land. Ever since the Green Revolution in the 1980s, small farmers have experienced unequal development. These politically disadvantaged communities, according to James C. Scott (1990), practice what he calls a “politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors. Rumour, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms is a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups” (p. 19). There are certain conformities which he coins the “moral economy” that have to be understood and carried out to avoid alienation that would cause harm to the family structure (Scott, 1985; 1990). These details even through time, may be hard to fend off and subtle to outsiders. In looking at *Mek Mulung* as a tradition, then, the social complexity of this Malay rural community must be considered relationally to *Mek Mulung* as one of its core public practices. According to Cai (2017), the tradition is likely to be “shaped by complex power dynamics among the different stakeholders over who the tradition belongs to, who has the power to define it and for whom it is being defined” (p.

19). Hence, the social structure of the performers themselves, and the level of importance of the performance within the village would be the driving force behind the type and quality of discussions surrounding *Mek Mulung* in its village social context.

### **1.8.2 Transformations of Performing Arts, Modernity, Reconstruction and Revival**

While traditions like *Mek Mulung* show signs of rapid decline and the loss of resiliency in its original performance context, revival methods may provide solutions for sustainability. In conceptualizing her theoretical model of music revivals, Tamara Livingston defines revivals as “social movements which strive to ‘restore’ a musical system believed to be disappearing or completely relegated to the past for the benefit of contemporary society” (1999, p. 66). Livingston offers a list of distinguishing characteristics which are common to music revivals, which include:

1. An individual or small group of “core revivalists”
2. Revival informants and/or original sources (e.g., historical sound recordings)
3. A revivalist ideology and discourse
4. A group of followers forming the basis of a revivalist community
5. Revivalist activities (organizations, festivals, competitions)
6. Nonprofit and/or commercial enterprises catering to the revivalist market (1999, p. 69; 2016, p. 61)

Anthony Wallace’s “charismatic leaders” (1956, p. 273) and Owe Ronstrom’s “burning souls” (1996, p.10) have also been identified as among the key driving forces behind many revivalist movements.

But Livingston (1999; 2016) also notes that music revivals are phenomena aimed towards meeting various needs of the middle-class population in sharing their ideologies,

rather than necessarily the needs of the original, often working-class or rural, culture bearers. Anna Schultz's (2013) discussion of the relationship between music and nationalism within the Indian context also notes the middle-class impetus behind appropriative revivals of local "tradition", taking into account the cosmopolitan nature of nationalism as proposed by Thomas Turino (2000, pp. 15-16):

Nations are necessarily cosmopolitan because they understand themselves in relation to other nations, but they must articulate distinctiveness from other nations to create and maintain national boundaries. Likewise, nations require local practices to generate the affective bonds of national sentiment, but locally distinct groups may also threaten the nation by claiming their own national status. According to Turino, these paradoxes are resolved through modernist reform in which aspects of local practice are combined with "the best" of modern, cosmopolitan aesthetics and ethics. For music, this usually involves the objectification and recontextualization of indigenous forms within cosmopolitan social contexts. (Schultz, 2013, p. 22)

Along the same lines in South Korea, new *p'ansori* artists declared that "traditional art should be [made] relevant to contemporary social conditions...by bridging the gap between tradition and modernity" (Um, 2013, p. 199).

Departing from the position taken by earlier theorists (e.g. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012) regarding the agonistic relationship between tradition and modernity, Matthew Cohen offers the view that "both substantive tradition and reflexive modernity emerg[ed] in Asia in negotiation with European modernity...[bringing] about new modes for the social organization, invention, appreciation, and representation of old forms of performance" (2016, p. xv).

Citing S.N. Eisenstadt (2000, p. 15), Cohen notes that:

the introduction of modernity to Asian societies involved the incorporation of selected aspects of (w)estern universalistic elements of modernity in the

construction of...new collective identities, without necessarily giving up specific components of ... traditional identities. (2016, p. xv)

Because of this, revivals are often referred to as representational forms of performing arts and in heritage activities. Cai (2017) writes that “heritage is often promoted, privileged, and normalised by the state and other establishments of power, in the form of an authorised (or authorising) heritage discourse, that contests and marginalises alternative perspectives of heritage, leading to heritage dissonance” (pp.18-19). The revivalist reconstructs the performance based on their needs and tastes that are formed among the knowledges and expectations of their own environment, working within a “negotiation of expectations” quite different from the pre-revived form (Cai, 2017; Theodossopoulos, 2011). Managing these expectations and the constructions of the performance often include the dynamics of spectatorship, and the urban audience and individual live music experience (Auslander, 2008; Burland & Pitts, 2016; Elsaesser & Hagener, 2010). In the current digital age, experiences are further fractured and shared on multifaceted platforms and circulated through various social media formats where audiences create new audience experiences for other, virtual audience consumptions (Bennet, 2014). These reconstructive performances may construct new meanings and relationships (Counsell & Wolf, 2001; Schechner, 2013; Tuan, 2001).

Revival activities attract viewers who can be quite separated from the location of the cultural bearers, literally and metaphorically. Audiences supporting these revival performances and its creators form a network that support one another. Benedict Anderson’s (2006) “imagined communities” is a concept that has been used to describe groups of people declaring themselves to share some commonalities in response to the need for a feeling of belongingness. Neil V. Rosenberg refers “imagined communities”

in relation to musical revivals to “... networks of people who share musical interests” (2014, p. 104).

Performing revivals frequently imply modifications that reflect revivalist ideals. Tan Sooi Beng dissects the recreation of *Ronggeng* and how it moved from a folk tradition to a popular dance style in which “certain elements have been selected while other undesirable ones have been omitted, so that the music and dances of the new national *ronggeng* have become divorced from their folk forms and settings” (2005, p. 290). In Korea, Keith Howard notes that western practices of staging performances for the proscenium-arch stage were one of a number of elements influenced by the Korean government’s westernization process (2016c, p. 259).

Revivalists’ aesthetics thus inevitably become instrumental in driving the reconstructed performance, but their intentions and process should nonetheless be able to merit the tradition considerably. Norzizi Zulkafli’s (2017) thesis emphasized the idea of “cultural respect” which Rustom Bharucha (1996) elaborated as an important means to negotiate and stage her intercultural *Mak Yong* performance using a Shakespearean plot and staged in Australia as well as in Kuala Lumpur. Norzizi notes Bharucha’s discussion of claims by Schechner (1982) that “borrowing, stealing, and exchanging” techniques and conventions does not empirically improve a cultural practice but may actively “lead to distorted meanings” (Norzizi, 2017, p. 22). Engaging with these arguments, Norzizi as a producer discusses the importance of creating and performing cultural aesthetic integrity, which she calls “internal space”, to plot out a director’s choice of presentation (2017, p. 40).

Revival presentations raise the question of their value to the culture or tradition that is being revived. Where is the value and who is valuing it? Gibson and Pendlebury

(2009) acknowledge that systems and experts governed by outside agencies frequently exert external values on heritage environments. In another argument, Rodseth (2018) suggests that “value” itself is a contested anthropological concept that has potentially endless ways of measuring its validity. Therefore, how should we view importance within a significant culture? Cherrington (2011) notes with favor Gibson and Pendlebury’s idea of “cultural democracy”, where “pluralism and the involvement of communities in deciding what is to be retained and treasured are now all recognized as progressive, with the inherent leaving behind of the experts or at least a diminishing of their role” (p. 108). This would allow, sometimes in retrospect, the voices of multiple quarters, including audiences, culture bearers, the surrounding community and various agencies, to give collective meaning to revival activities.

### **1.8.3 Implications of Transformation of Traditional Arts and Constructing Heritage**

Revival activities with regard to *Mek Mulung* have largely involved moving the performance from its traditional base in the village of Wang Tepus to urban concert halls. A tradition which has previously served various functions to the village community is now providing merely an entertainment function to an audience with an entirely different background. Thomas Turino (2008) refers to this shift in performance function from that of a participatory to a presentational nature. Joel Akins and Bussakorn Binson (2011) see the movement from a historical performance context to that of a modern one resulting in a role shift from a participatory audience to that of a spectator/onlooker audience. Similarly, Keith Howard (2014, p. 144) notes that aging Korean singers of folk songs were replaced by younger singers who creatively revived these songs to cater to a new audience.



Thus, the presentation of a performance is influenced heavily by the new audience, who tend to have distinct preferences for certain performance styles generally unrelated to those once practiced in the village.

Alongside those traditions which are acknowledged and recognized as genuine traditions, Hobsbawm pointed out in his classic work that “‘traditions’ which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented” (2012, p. 1). Using the term “invented tradition”, Hobsbawm refers to “both ‘traditions’ actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period—a matter of a few years perhaps—and establishing themselves with great rapidity” (p. 1). Invented traditions according to Sahlins are also “fabricated with an eye politic to the present situation” (1999, p. 402). Sarkissian’s (2000) description of the Portuguese dance in the Melaka settlement in Malaysia is a case of invented tradition, which largely serves the community in terms of a tourism attraction product. A new form of music and dance, which is claimed to be a revival of their tradition and represent their heritage, was created from gathering of appropriate inputs deemed Portuguese from various sources, locally as well as overseas, especially Portugal.

One example of an invented tradition in performance is the evolution of the classical *Kathak* dance of modern India (Walker, 2016). Claimed by hegemonic authorities to date back to ancient times via the hereditary lineages of Hindu and Muslim performers, *Kathak* actually developed into its current form fairly recently during the mid-nineteenth century. With influences that emerged from performances found among courtesans and folk performers, middle-class female reformers who themselves were professional dancers created and promoted *Kathak* as a “classical” dance by introducing it to affluent Indian families in the twentieth century. What constitutes the present classical

*Kathak* performance is of recent creation, which became established and gained a strong following within a short duration, and became accepted as a classical dance form that shares the same official national recognition as *Kathakali*, *Bharatanatyam*, *Manipuri*, *Kuchipudi*, and *Odissi*.

Through concertization and staging revivals, traditional performances now shift from a community performance to a commodified cultural performance product whose “underlying commercial availability promised to make the simulation better than the original” (Outka, 2009, p. 4). This process now exerts consumer values onto reconstructions of performance, making commercial performance a mark of success. The audience—now the consumer-audience—creates the demand for the performance and the performance makers have to deliver on consumer expectations (Nur Izzati, 2014). Outka (2009) further sees the commodified traditions as “commodified authentic” to “allow consumers to be at once connected to a range of values roughly aligned with authenticity yet also to be fully modern” (p. 4). The aesthetics are now evaluated by the new performance “communities” (Kaeppler, 2001; Nur Izzati, 2014) that may be and often are separate from the original culture bearers. Although commodification of a heritage practice may give rise to negative remarks on its “authenticity integrity”, it may also encourage tourists or interested local individuals to inquire further into the performance practice and thus help sustain a community and its traditions. Such dances in Bali, for example, are not only used for tourism locally, but are presented as an authentic cultural product in international festivals to encourage more tourism to the island (Barker, Darma & Agung, 2006).

Revivals and heritage movements also become political when involving government agencies who use them to promote their ideologies and exercise their own

policies. In Europe, cultural products are widely used as a vehicle to promote and execute government policies (Calligaro, 2013; Gibson & Pendlebury, 2009; Gray, 2009; Holden, 2004; ‘John Holden’s Capturing Cultural Value:’, 2005; Kaiser, 2017). Cultural policy aims to promote attributes to improve the development of the nation and benefit society. In the case of Malaysia, government agencies, too, employ cultural activities to promote active nation building (Rais, 2009). However, the products promoted by these agencies, in line with Livingston’s comments above, by and large carry revivalist ideology. The revival would in turn be tied to the political ideals of the ruling government. Sahlins argues that:

what is called culture or tradition is strategically adaptable to the pragmatic situation, especially to the class interest of acculturated elites, even as it leaves individuals free to change their identity when it serves them. This is perhaps the main criticism of contemporary culture-talk: it is really instrumental, an ideological smokescreen of more fundamental interest, principally power and greed — practical functions, *nota bene* that have the added persuasive virtues of being universal, self-explanatory and morally reprehensible. (1999, p. 403)

Hence, when performing the *Mek Mulung* under these agencies, it is necessary to understand whose interest it is benefiting and its overall intent.

The staging of the concertized *Mek Mulung* is highly elaborate in terms of the content, costumes, and props, and could hardly be considered an authentic *Mek Mulung* presentation if our baseline is the village form. In tourism, this “staged authenticity” is often presented to create a “perceived authenticity” through which traditional tourist attractions can be marketed (Chhabra, Healy & Sills, 2003). Staged authenticity is tied to nostalgia, ideas of a romanticized past staged for the consumption of interested visitors. Nonetheless, it was the landmark concertized performances by the PPAG that became the

template or format for a modern concertized *Mek Mulung* presentation that is now considered the official version. By basing their performances on the concertized format initiated and established by the PPAG, which has been widely and positively received by the general public, other performing arts groups did not have to reinvent the wheel when presenting *Mek Mulung* as a stage performance. The reconstructed performance format can be replicated with the use of documentary materials, such as texts and recordings, from the initial concertized form that further disengages *Mek Mulung* performance from the cultural bearers in Wang Tepus. Performances that are reproduced or recycled in this way without any engagement from the culture bearers are unlikely to grasp the cultural sensitivities of the *Mek Mulung* or pick up on misrepresentations.

For example, following the dissolution of the PPAG, the Kedah state National Department of Arts and Culture (Jabatan Kesenian dan Kebudayaan Negara, Negeri Kedah – JKKN Kedah) embarked on a large scale *Mek Mulung* tour across Malaysia in 2013 with their own troupe performing the *Mek Mulung* concertized performance which the directors described as an improved version. It is important to note that the *Mek Mulung* performance that was being promoted and presented to the urban audience was the modern version created by the PPAG; and only opaquely reflects the characteristics of the village version of *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus. The recycled modern version was enjoyed by urban audiences across Malaysia as a form of concert entertainment based on traditional Malay dance drama, but from audiences gained little knowledge of the existence of the village version that is performed in Wang Tepus, from which this modern version had its origin (Nur Izzati, 2014).

In this thesis I will present evidence that the creation of a modern version of *Mek Mulung*, which was followed by rapidity in its successive re-staging within a span of

fifteen years, provides a strong indication that an “invention of tradition” as described by Hobsbawm (2012) and Cannadine (2012) may have taken place. Audiences were thus presented with the invented version of *Mek Mulung* without realizing that what they were watching was the new version of *Mek Mulung* performance which did not portray the traditional village form which still exists in Wang Tepus. Nonetheless, they could have obtained this information from the program notes made available at the venues of concertized performances.

What is interesting in the case of *Mek Mulung* is the continued simultaneous existence of the village version and the concertized version within the same time frame, even though the village version continues to attenuate. A similar co-existence was observed by Keith Howard in the revival of Korean identity through performance arts and crafts. Howard defines the new creativity that had emerged from the preservation of those practices still in existence as “postrevival”. Howard sees that these “two elements, preservation and creativity, go side-by-side, one validating the other, and one ensuring the maintenance of activity in the other. Preservation and creativity are, then, equally important elements in revival” (2014, pp. 152-153). What is key then, in the case of *Mek Mulung*, is reconnecting the village and the urban traditions in a respectful and equal manner.

Traditions move on and evolve in accordance with the changing desires of holders and new receivers of the tradition, to ensure that the tradition continues to be currently valid. Traditions are icons of the past, bearers of identities carried over to the next generations. Strong traditions evolve and adapt to avoid decline, and change to re-emerge in a new context. Traditional performances are important in most modern societies, providing them with cultural identities that signify national pride, which frequently serves

as the motivation towards revival efforts. However, traditions may suffer the risk of decline or ultimate extinction when traditions lose their importance as a consequence of modernization, destruction due to war, or other external factors.

Measuring the rate of change or the rate of decline of a tradition is difficult. Most of the literature concerned with measuring change in tradition have dealt with the question in relative terms. Nonetheless, it is agreed that changes will take place in traditions and new ones will emerge. Peripheral traditions may become more significant as they merge or syncretize with new or established ones. Traditional societies are also continuously undergoing changes. Technological advancement and modernization have impacted greatly on today's society, which promotes efficiency and greater health and well-being, but also the possibility of marginalizing existing traditions. It is unfortunate that growing modernization can have detrimental effects on performances that have achieved a postrevival status. There is the ongoing danger of performances gravitating towards Western notions of what constitutes a good stage performance, and the homogenisation of supposedly separate traditional performance styles if they are continually injected with elements borrowed from Western stage musicals and spectacles (see discussion in Chapter Three).

In the end, who owns the tradition or culture when it is active in various formats and in different spaces? Can tradition be shared? In terms of communal ownership of a shared tradition, Juniper Hill and Caroline Bithell admit that it "may be relatively clear for an intimate and participatory music culture"; however, if this concept of communal ownership of a shared tradition is "extended from localized networks of physically interactive and interrelated people to the imagined community of the nation, then there is

a danger that the primary criterion for determining the authority of a tradition holder may be his or her ethnicity or nationality” (2016, p. 21).

## **1.9 Limitations of the Study**

Key limitations of this study include the amount of previous documentary resources and poor geographical accessibility to *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus. Most of the available archival materials were written after 1975, of which the majority contain information of similar content. Available resources earlier than that were not systematic in their reporting, making it difficult to establish a comprehensive account of historical *Mek Mulung* performances. And current academic writings have mostly emphasized the importance of the ritual aspects rather than focussing on the staged performance itself.

Another limitation has been the absence of performances of *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus throughout the duration of my doctoral research. The last opportunity I had watching an organic performance in Wang Tepus was in 2011; the last reported performance of any kind to my knowledge occurred in 2014. Without the opportunity to witness an organic performance of *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus during my doctoral research I was not able to personally track the progression of the changes that could have taken place since 2011 to the performance as practiced and enjoyed in the village. Furthermore, apart from the performers themselves, there seemed to be very little interest on the part of the community in reviving the performance, leaving the performers and their troupe to fight by themselves for the continuity and survival of *Mek Mulung*. Modernity factors, such as technological advancement in agriculture, decline in reliance on spiritual attachment in everyday lives, and greater access to other forms of affordable entertainment, make *Mek Mulung* less appealing to the community. Mystical elements that

are attached to the *Mek Mulung* performance are not acceptable to their Islamic way of life. These are aspects which make the community no longer as enthusiastic to invest their time and effort towards supporting *Mek Mulung*'s performances.

Unlike many other performing arts which are found in many different parts of the east coast, *Mek Mulung* can only be found in Wang Tepus. There is only one specific group that performs *Mek Mulung*, with a core group of performers, while others come and go. To make matters worse, each performer is knowledgeable only about a specific aspect of the performance. There is no one performer who knows every aspect of performing *Mek Mulung*. For instance, in the music ensemble, not only is the musician's knowledge confined to the music aspect of the *Mek Mulung* performance, but also to specific instrument that he plays. That means no one individually has full knowledge of the entire performance. This suggests that oral accounts provided by individual performers may be difficult to use in triangulating data. Furthermore, since current troupe members come from the same generation, it is difficult to verify facts about *Mek Mulung* performances that occurred in earlier generations. There could be biases in their reporting, but this is impossible to verify or debunk. This specificity of roles is one element which prevents *Mek Mulung* from being fully resilient towards sustaining its performance. I address these issues in Chapter Seven as proposals for preservation measures.

In contrast I was able to witness many performances of the urban version of *Mek Mulung* personally and make analyses of data from a mixed variety of urban *Mek Mulung* performances. However, there were some which I could not attend because of geographical distance. This was overcome by getting access to, and analysing, the recordings of these performances supplemented by others' reviews of the performance.



Chapter Two describes what constitutes a *Mek Mulung* performance in its village context. Chapter Three discusses the development of *Mek Mulung* as a popular traditional performance from rural to urban stages. Chapter Four looks into the development of *Mek Mulung* as a heritage performance focussing on various government agencies that help disseminate the performance to a larger audience and to promote Kedah's cultural identity. Chapter Five discusses the responses of audience from a variety of backgrounds towards various *Mek Mulung* performances. Chapter Six discusses the impact of *Mek Mulung* on other forms of products. The last chapter provides a final summary and conclusion.

## Chapter 2

### Historical Development of the *Mek Mulung* Performance

#### 2.1 Introduction

Malaysia, with approximately thirty million inhabitants, was a British colony before becoming an independent nation in 1957.<sup>6</sup> Kedah is one of the nine Sultanate states that make up Peninsular Malaysia.<sup>7</sup> (Refer to Figure 1.1 in Chapter One for the map of Malaysia and the location of the state of Kedah in Peninsula Malaysia). The other two remaining states—Pulau Pinang and Melaka—which were previously occupied as British Settlements, are administered by the Yang DiPertuan Negeri or Governors instead of Sultans. Separated from Peninsular Malaysia by the South China Sea on the eastern side are the states of Sabah and Sarawak on the island of Borneo, which are also headed by Yang DiPertuan Negeri or Governors. Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, and Labuan are the three regions that make up the Wilayah Persekutuan (Federal Territory).

Malaysia's diverse multi-ethnic and multi-religious population contributes to the variety and richness of its musical and cultural traditions. Traditional performances are localized according to where the different indigenous groups establish their residence. Thus, performances found in one place may not be found in other areas; and if they are, they may occur in variations peculiar to that particular region only (Rahmah, 2005).

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<sup>6</sup> According to the Department of Statistics, Malaysia has a population of 32, 566.9 million up to the fourth quarter of 2018, with an annual population growth of 1.1 percent from 32,203.8 million during the same period the previous year (Mohd Uzir, 2019). The racial breakdown estimation of Malaysian citizens for 2018 is 20.07 million (69.1 percent) Bumiputera (Malay, multiple Borneo ethnics and the indigenous), 6.69 million (23.0 percent) Chinese, 2.01 million (6.9 percent) Indian, and 0.29 million (1.0 percent) Others. (Mohd Uzir, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Kedah estimated population in 2018 was 2.16 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Official Portal, 2018).

There is no definite record of *Mek Mulung*'s origin (Matusky & Tan, 2012), although it has been pointed out by various sources, and the culture bearers themselves believe, that it had travelled from a place called Ligor in southern Thailand approximately 500 years ago (Zinnitulniza, 2014). It was around this time that the area now known as Peninsular Malaysia was experiencing various social, economic, and political changes including increased maritime activities at the port of Kuala Kedah in the north. This resulted in an influx of traders from India, China, Portugal and the Netherlands, and, eventually, Britain (Church, 2006; Mohd Sukki & Adi Yasran, 2012). Located not too far from the port and sharing a common border with south Thailand, the village of Wang Tepus with its *Mek Mulung* tradition would have felt the effects of the social, economic, and political environment during this period; thus, contributing to the origin and shaping of the *Mek Mulung* of today. (Refer to Figure 1.3 in Chapter One for the location of Wang Tepus in the map of Kedah). Wang Tepus is a quiet village surrounded by paddy fields, hills, and fruit trees. The villagers in this area rely mostly on agriculture such as paddy farming and rubber tapping as their main source of income with fruit orchards producing seasonal fruits for additional income (Figures 2.1 and 2.2).

## **2.2 Kedah: From Oldest Malay Sultanate to a Modernized State**

Kedah is situated in the northwestern part of Peninsular Malaysia which borders Thailand in the north. Kedah's economy has been largely dependent on agriculture, mainly paddy farming, and trading of agricultural products such as fruits and grains, as well as animals such as buffalos, goats, and poultry (Andaya & Andaya, 2017; Hooker, 2003). The geography and its fertile soil, as well as its well-situated position as a trading centre, provided Kedah with the right combination to develop into an entrepot that



Figure 2.1: A paddy field scene in the village of Wang Tepus. (Photograph taken by the author, April 2017).

attracted traders from near and far (Andaya & Andaya, 2015; Falarti, 2014; Kennedy, 1962) as well as a conducive milieu for cosmopolitan socio-cultural interactions.<sup>8</sup>

Known to be the oldest political entity in Malaysia, Kedah has been referred to in historical sources as Quedah, Kheddah, Kataha/Kadara, and Kadaram/Kalagam, the latter bearing Sanskrit and Tamil influences (Andaya & Andaya, 2017; Augustine, 1996; Begbie, 1967; Jabil, Nooriah & Ahmad Tharmizzie, 2010; Majumdar, 1961)<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> As a major entrepot with maritime and overland routes, there was an intermingling of “an eclectic admixture of people, goods, and cultures” (Falarti, 2014, p.184).

<sup>9</sup> Other references to old Kedah include Arabic/Persian influences such as *Kilah*, *Kalah*, and *Qalha* and Chinese references as *Langgasu/Langa* or *Langkasuka* during Liang Dynasty and *Kora* or *Kola* during Tang Dynasty. The Chinese writer I-Ching uses *Chiah-Chin/Kie Ta’a* or *Kietaha* to refer to Kedah (Jabil, Nooriah, & Ahmad Tharmizzie, 2010).





Figure 2.2: A scene of rubber tree-lined path in the village of Wang Tepus. Photograph taken by the author.

Archaeological remains providing evidence of Hindu civilization were discovered from excavation works at Lembah Bujang (the Bujang Valley) in the central region of the state of Kedah. Ruins and relics found in the Bujang Valley are believed to be seventh- or eighth-century remains of Hindu-Buddhist temples which were part of the Srivijaya Empire that spanned Java and Siam dating back to the sixth century (Hooker, 2003).<sup>10</sup> It is for this reason that Kedah is considered the oldest discrete civilization in the Malay

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<sup>10</sup> Hooker (2003) also points out the discovery of 5<sup>th</sup>- and 6<sup>th</sup> -century Sanskrit Buddhist stone inscriptions. Andaya & Andaya (2017) suggest, however, that these temple ruins are not earlier than 10<sup>th</sup> century.

Peninsula, dating back to the seventh century (Ahmad Farhan, 2012; Mohd Sukki & Adi Yasran, 2012).<sup>11</sup>

According to Andaya (2001), the centre of Kedah between the fifth and early eleventh centuries was Sungai Mas in the Bujang Valley, but shifted slowly to Pengkalan Bujang, which maintained its dominance until the end of the fourteenth century. Archaeological evidence indicates a thriving economy in Kedah largely based on agriculture, trade and the distribution of local products. As Andaya and Andaya point out, merchants were attracted to Kedah because it offered them “a whole range of facilities which became typical of Malay trading states—a hospitable attitude to foreigners, efficiency in discharging cargoes, desired products available for purchase and an enlightened and co-operative administration” (2017 p. 28).

Malay history thus goes back many centuries before the historic founding of Melaka in the thirteenth century. According to Leonard Andaya, “it is possible to suggest that a *Melayu* ethnicity was being developed along the Straits of Melaka beginning perhaps as early as the seventh century. Only much later did the culture of the *Melayu* begin to spread beyond these shores” (2001, p. 316).<sup>12</sup> Prior to the arrival of Islam in Kedah, which is usually dated to 1136 CE (Ahmad Farhan, 2012; Falarti, 2014; Kobkua, 2000; Mohd Sukki & Adi Yasran, 2012), Kedah was a Hindu kingdom ruled by kings who were known as Sri Maharajah. The ninth Maharajah, who converted to Islam, changed his name from Maharajah Phra Ong Mahawangsa to Sultan Mudzafar/Muzalfah Shah (Ahmad Farhan, 2012; Falarti, 2014). This marked the beginning of the new Kedah

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<sup>11</sup> At about the same time, Siam was founded as the kingdom of Sukothai in 1239. In 1351 Siam fell to Ayuthia which was later captured and destroyed by Burma in 1767. The Thai government of Tonburi which began to recover from the destruction managed to survive until 1782 before it was overthrown and thus began the rule of the Chakri Dynasty, whose first king took the title of Rama I and made Bangkok its administrative center (Ahmad Farhan, 2012; Church, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Andaya (2001) states his preference for using “Melayu” instead of the English term “Malay” on the basis of its usage in early documents and having less political connotation.

Sultanate, which in lasting to the present day has been acknowledged as the oldest unbroken independent kingship line in the Malay world (Ahmad Farhan, 2012; Falarti, 2014)<sup>13</sup>.

Islam in Kedah is believed to have been introduced by Muslim traders from Aceh (formerly known as the port-kingdom of Pasai) in north Sumatra which had established important links with Banten and Makassar in an important Islamic trade system (Kraus, 1984; Winstedt, 1948). The likelihood of economic, political, and cultural interconnections between Aceh and Kedah are influenced by the closeness of the geographical distance between them (Falarti, 2014).<sup>14</sup> Melaka's strategic position in the middle of the Straits soon became a favored destination for Arab and Muslim traders following the adoption of Islam by its rulers.<sup>15</sup> However, stability in the Malay Peninsula was threatened following the fall of Melaka to the Portuguese (1511CE) and then to the Dutch (1641CE). The downfall of Melaka saw traders moving their activities along the coast of the peninsula towards the north to Kuala Kedah, and especially several centres on the north and east coast of Sumatra which have long been Melaka's trading rivals. The kingdom of Ayudhya in the north was looked upon by Kedah and other Malay states as a

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<sup>13</sup> The recent discovery of Muslim coins dating to the Abbasid period (848 CE), two Muslim graves, presumably belonging to people of Persian origin dated 826-829 CE and 903/904 CE, and 7<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century Middle Eastern ceramics and glass types, are suggestions of early Muslim presence in this region (Falarti, 2014).

<sup>14</sup> Links between Muslim merchants from Arabia, Persia and the Indian subcontinent in the Malay-Indonesian world had already been established around the 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Frequenting the harbour cities, their activities were not limited to trading, but also transmitting Islam to the local population. However, Muslim traders' involvement in the spreading of Islam became less active with the arrival of large numbers of wandering *Sufis* and scholars from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Azra, 2004). Matusky and Chopyak (2008) mention Arab traders and missionaries who brought Islam to Peninsular Malaysia during the mid-1200s. Marcinkowski (2000) pointed out the "not sufficiently known issue of the coming of Islam" to Southeast Asia despite *da'wah* activities and international maritime trade in the eastern Indian Ocean (p.191). Kersten (2004) also pointed out the central role played by the Sufi strand of Islam during the initial development and the evolution of Islam in Southeast Asia which resulted in a distinct Malay-Muslim culture (p. 3). Andaya & Andaya (2017) recognize Sufism as the vehicle by which Islam was spread in Aceh; however, this was not the case for the Malay Peninsula during the Melaka period.

<sup>15</sup> During Siam's dominance as a Southeast Asian power from 15<sup>th</sup> until late 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Malay-Indonesian world was experiencing a process of Islamization which saw the conversion of many rulers of Malay petty states. As early as late 13<sup>th</sup> century, the first conversion took place in Sumatra which was then followed by the rulers of two important power centers on the Malay Peninsula of Melaka (1409) and Patani (1457). (Kersten, 2004; Kraus, 1984). Kraus (1984) suggests that as a result of Siamese expansion during the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Islam began to spread to Patani which became an important link in the Islamic trade system comprising of Aceh, Bantam and Makassar.

power which they could depend on (Cho, 1999). Nonetheless, when Kedah was conquered by Aceh in 1619CE, it had to abide by Aceh's ruling that all direct trading with the port of Kuala Kedah was prohibited, which resulted it being abandoned for several years with limited trading activities (Kennedy, 1962). It was not until following the death of the Sultan of Aceh in 1641CE, as well as increasing Dutch control over Aceh's aggressive and expansionist regime which saw the lessening of influence of Aceh over Kedah, that Kuala Kedah developed into a major port. In 1650CE the *Undang-undang Pelabuhan Kedah* (Kedah Port Laws) were drawn up to cater to the trading rules and regulations required of a major entrepot. The urgency of the need to have the *Undang-undang Pelabuhan Kedah* was reflected in it being drawn up before any other Kedah laws (Mohd Sukki & Adi Yasran, 2012).<sup>16</sup>

In the northern part of the peninsula, Burmese destruction of the Thai kingdom of Ayudhya in 1767 led to the rise of the new Chakri dynasty in Thailand beginning in 1782, which put pressure on the northern Malay states of Patani, Kelantan, Kedah, and Perak (Andaya & Andaya, 2017; Church, 2006; Kennedy, 1962; Kersten, 2004).<sup>17</sup> British presence could also be felt in the north when in 1786, Kedah, expecting to gain an ally against the Thais, ceded Penang Island and Province Wellesley, a strip of land on the mainland opposite Penang Island, to the British East India Company (Andaya & Andaya, 2017; Church, 2006; Kennedy, 1962; Mills, 1966).<sup>18</sup> By this time, the port of Kuala Kedah

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<sup>16</sup>Inclusion of extensive Islamic elements in the *Undang-undang Pelabuhan Kedah* provide evidence for the possible association with the prior arrival of Islam in Kedah in 1136 (Mohd Sukki & Adi Yasran, 2012).

<sup>17</sup>These northern states which have been vassals of Sukothai kings, continued to be pressured by the new Ayudhya kingdom which was established in 1351CE. The prominence of the Ayudhya kingdom coincided with the dominance of Muslim trade in Southeast Asia and the Islamization of areas in the region (Omar Farouk, 1980). The kingdom of Ayudhya was then destroyed by the Burmese in 1767 but was later rebuilt under the Tonburi government in 1768. However, following an uprising, the Chakri Dynasty began its rule in 1782 and established its administrative capital in Bangkok (Ahmad Farhan, 2012). The Malay Sultanates of Patani, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu were placed under the administration of the principal province of Nakhon Sri Thammarat (Ligor). (Andaya & Andaya, 2017; Kersten, 2004).

<sup>18</sup>Begbie (1967) provides a detailed description in Chapter 3 (pp. 94-132) of the British-Kedah connection with the issue of cession of Pulau Pinang to the British.



in the Malay peninsula had replaced the port of Banda Aceh in Sumatra as the centre for maritime activities, which saw an influx of traders from all over the world including Indians, Chinese, and Europeans (Mohd Sukki & Adi Yasran, 2012) with “a cosmopolitan population of Chinese, Javanese, Achehnese, and Indians” (Hooker, 2003, p. 89). The port’s prosperity ended in 1821 when it was attacked by Siam, resulting in an exodus of the population with their ruler to seek refuge with the British in Penang and Province Wellesley (Andaya & Andaya, 2017; Gullick, 1985; Hooker, 2003; Mills, 1966; Sharom, 1971). Kedah’s economy, which was largely supported by its trade with Penang, was severely affected when trade was diverted to Siam (Sharom, 1971).

During the following two decades there were periodic protests, attacks, and revolts led by the exiled Kedah Sultan and his followers. By this time, Siam realized that Kedah would not submit to their authority and the British Straits government had warned Siam that it would not provide any more assistance in suppressing the constant rebellions from Kedah. It was not until 1842 that the Kedah Sultanate regained its status and began rehabilitation and rebuilding efforts under the government of Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin II (Ahmad Farhan, 2012; Gullick, 1985; Kennedy, 1962; Mills, 1966). According to Gullick (1985), “economic recovery of Kedah between the 1850s and the 1870s was the result of expansion of its peasant agriculture” (p. 111).<sup>19</sup> The signing of the Anglo-Thai Treaty of 1909 established the modern and final border between Thailand and British Malaya, with Thailand retaining the provinces of Satun, Patani, Yala and Narathiwat, and relinquishing suzerainty over Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan and Terengganu to the British (Kersten, 2004; Kraus, 1984; Winstedt, 1948).

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<sup>19</sup> To escape the economic hardship under Siamese occupation, Kedah was left almost empty of people when the population sought refuge and decided to remain in the British territory of Province Wellesley. Those who came to settle in Kedah after 1850 mostly came from the north-east, especially from Patani, which brought the population to a satisfactory level of about 50,000 which enabled Kedah to achieve agricultural prosperity thereafter (Gullick, 1985).

With a multitude of cultural exchanges within this border region, and the need to maintain and protect the sovereignty, or *daulat*, of the Sultanate, the Sultans and notables of Kedah reinforced their legacy through written texts largely composed in the form of epics, or *hikayat*. Referred to by the British as the *Kedah Annals*, the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* existed as a written document from at least the late eighteenth century, although oral versions had been circulating much longer (Falarti, 2014; Hooker, 2003; Maier, 1985; Siti Hawa, 1998)<sup>20</sup>. According to Siti Hawa (1998), Sultan Muazzam Syah ibnu Sultan Muzalfah Syah (the exiled ruler of Kedah) ordered the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* to be recorded as a written document to ensure that future generations would have knowledge of the history of Kedah, especially in recounting the origin of the royal dynasty and the deeds of some of the rulers (Hooker, 2003).

Among the tales included in the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* is the war between *Sri Rama* and the monkey God, *Hanuman*, that ended up with Langkapuri becoming deserted with the exception of *Vishnu's Garuda*, a mythical bird. At some point in time, *Garuda*, which had wanted to show its power, had put up a wager to the Muslim Prophet Solomon that it would sink the ship belonging to the prince of the emperor of Rome so as to prevent him from making a safe trip to marry a princess of the Chinese emperor. Another story recalls the fight that broke out between the Bamboo prince and a group of robbers which left the prince wounded; he reverted to bamboo, and was never to be seen again. In yet another, the marriage of a son of the ruler of Kedah to a demon girl produced a son, known as *Raja Bersiong* (Tusked King) who became obsessed with consuming

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<sup>20</sup> The *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* was first published in English in 1849 “as a serial in the Journal of the Indian Archipelago and Eastern Asia under the title of “Translation of the Keddah Annals, termed Marong Mahawangsa, and sketches of the ancient condition of some of the Nations of Eastern Asia with Reference to the Malays” (Maier, 1985, p. 8). According to Falarti (2014), “there is little known about its history (other than it was) ... written in Kedah and was in the possession of the exiled ruler of Kedah while he was in the neighboring British settlement of Penang in the 1820s and 1830s” (p. 21).

human blood, which he initially obtained from condemned criminals and eventually innocent victims. These stories were likely developed from true events syncretized with more romanticized folk or popular tales. Written down in *jawi* script, these stories were meant to depict Kedah as an ancient and great ruling power and authority (Maier, 1985). According to Winstedt (1938), texts of Malay literature were important references, and that, if not for associating the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* with *Sulalatu's-Salatin*, “it would not have been styled the *Kedah Annals* or been accepted as serious history” (p. 31).<sup>21</sup>

### **2.3 Kedah's Performing Arts**

Kedah's strategic position commanding sea and overland routes “enabled a regular exchange of traditions, literary sources, education, languages, sciences, and inventions to travel to and from Kedah with only short periods of disruptions” (Falarti, 2014, p. 184). Movement resulting from trading activities as well as the influx of migrants was one of the key factors in shaping Kedah's cultural scene, but this has not been well documented in most historical accounts. According to Ghulam-Sarwar (2008), changes in religion were among the principal factors that brought innovations and change into the Malay traditional arts forms over the centuries. In the Kedah region, there were changes in the belief systems, from animism, to Buddhism-Hinduism, to Islam. Ghulam-Sarwar states that with the coming of Islam, changes within performing traditions were deemed necessary,

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<sup>21</sup> The negative view towards *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* may be a consequence of it having the disadvantage of being written after the popular English version of the *Sejarah Melayu* and read against its background “and ever since, this primacy of the Malay Annals has never been subverted,” as cited by Maier (1988: 30) (Falarti, 2014, p. 21).

requiring, “if not a total abandonment of theater genres, then some sort of compromise or readjustment or removal of controversial elements within” (p. 12).<sup>22</sup>

It is likely that Thai culture influenced the leisure activities of the border population, especially the celebration of certain festivities popular in the northern region, such as occasions that mark the end of the harvest season, rites of passage, and warding off bad spirits from the village.<sup>23</sup> Musical instruments such as bamboo clappers used in *Mek Mulung* (called *kecere*) are also used in the Thai music ensemble (where they are called *krap*) (Miller, 2008). Other activities popular among villagers on both sides of the border in the past were games such as kite-flying, cock-fighting, bull-fighting, and horse-racing (Augustine, 1996). Bull-fighting, which was banned in 1936, was a very popular pastime that normally took place at the end of the harvesting season. Abu Talib (2010) notes the existence of a bull-fighting ring in Anak Bukit, the royal town of Kedah, which could accommodate 4000 spectators.

The *Wai khru*, a Thai ritual to honour teachers that is of fundamental importance in Thai culture, has its equivalent in the form of *Sembah Guru* in many Malay traditional performances, including *Mek Mulung*, *Wayang Kulit* and *Jikey* (Miller, 2008). Although local epics such as the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* show evidence of the presence of Islam in Kedah, old practices that were observed before the arrival of Islam are still present in many types of cultural entertainment in today’s villages (Hooker, 2003).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> According to Mohamad Luthfi (2011), although it is difficult to ascertain their origin, *Mek Mulung* rituals seem to contain elements of Malay animism, Hindu-Buddhism, as well Islam.

<sup>23</sup> Falarti (2014) believes that Kedah is culturally and socially linked to its neighbors by land (e.g. Siam, Songkhla, Nakhon Si Thammarat as well as other Malay territories) and across the sea (e.g. Sumatra, Burma, Europe, China, India, Persia). Nonetheless, Falarti (2014) feels that there is “insufficient ‘scholarly attention’ given to Malay indigenous literary, oral, or other historic, and cultural source” (p. 186).

<sup>24</sup> According to Hooker (2003), “traces of these older beliefs and practices survive in traditional agricultural rites and at celebrations to mark specific life-stages as well as at times of misfortunes (such as disasters and illness). They usually take the form of acts of propitiation to spirits and ancestors” (p. 23)

Various performing arts within the Malay community can be grouped into court music or folk performances. In the northern region of Peninsular Malaysia, court music in the form of the *Nobat* ensemble, was played in the royal courts of the states of Kedah and Perak. The *Nobat* is known to have influences from Middle Eastern and South Asian music and dates back in Southeast Asia to the Sultanate of Melaka in 1435 (Tunku Nong Jiwa, Raja Badri Shah & Sheppard, 1962).<sup>25</sup> Raja Iskandar (2015) has noted that the *Nobat* ensemble and its performance are more influenced by Islamic court traditions rather than Hindu elements, dating back to the seventh century. This ensemble was also mentioned in the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*, as well as in other colonial accounts. *Nobat* performances usually explicitly mark certain royal occasions, as well as being played during the month of Ramadhan to mark the breaking of the fast. In Kedah, the *Nobat* ensemble is stored in the top floor of the tower building adjacent to the Sultan's former palace, which is popularly referred to as the *Balai Nobat* (*Nobat Hall*) and built specifically for its safe keeping.

Rahmah (1979) notes that Kedah has the second largest number of performing arts genres in Peninsular Malaysia apart from Kelantan (Rahmah, 1979; Ku Zam Zam, 1991). Among the folk performances that are notable in the north are *Wayang Kulit*, *Menora*, *Gendang Silat*, *Mek Mulung*, *Hadrah*, and *Awang Batil* (Ahmad, 1976).<sup>26</sup> Others, like the *Mak Yong Laut* and *Jikey*, are now extinct or found to appear in fragments within other styles of performance, as reported by people who had witnessed them in the past. Malay folk performances are usually associated with the rural population, which is village-based

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<sup>25</sup> Matusky & Chopyak (2008) see very little effect of Indian musical practice on traditional Malay rural and court musics. Whatever Indian influences found in traditional Malay music have made its mark during the 1st century.

<sup>26</sup> *Menora*, *Jikey* and *Mak Yong* are dance-drama performances which include acting, singing, and dancing accompanied by their own music ensembles. *Menora* is still active in the northern states while *Jikey* is barely surviving. *Mak Yong* Kedah and Perlis have gone extinct. *Jikey* originated locally whereas *Menora* and *Mak Yong* have Thai influences and therefore also popular among the people of South Thailand.

and encourages community participation. Depending on the extent for the need for these performances, they can provide entertainment after a hard day's work in the fields, as celebrations for special occasions/events, as rituals for healing various kinds of ailments, or to ward off bad omens that might affect crop yields. These various forms of folk performance genres include theatrical forms like *Mek Mulung*, *Jikey*, and *Mak Yong Laut*, which share certain things in common: their stories, the types of instruments used, and types of props used such as masks, daggers, and rattan whips. All of these three performances also involve singing in a responsorial style. This differs from the theatrical form of *Mak Yong* found in the east coast states of Kelantan and Terengganu, whose music is sung in a heterophonic style. (See further discussion in section 2.7.3 in this Chapter).

In addition to the three theatrical forms mentioned above, *Awang Batil*, which is a form of storytelling, also utilizes colored wooden masks for certain characters. Masks painted red are usually worn by comic characters, while black ones are used for the old sage. In terms of story line, the *Puteri Dua Belas Beradik* appears in both the *Mek Mulung* and *Wayang Kulit Gedek* theatre performances. Occurrences of cross-dressing among the performers, whereby male actors put on female costumes to perform female characters, are found in both the *Hadrah* and the *Mek Mulung* theatre performances.

For most of these performances, the *serunai*, which is a free-reed aerophone, is used for playing the main melody, whereas the *rebab*, a three-stringed spike fiddle, is more commonly used for performances in the east coast states. *Mek Mulung*, *Jikey*, *Mak Yong Laut*, and the *Menora* also all make use of a pair of bamboo clappers as part of their ensemble.

These performing arts groups can be found in various locations in the northern region. Some of the northern Malay folk performing arts are unique to a particular

location. Apart from *Menora* and *Gendang Silat*, which are practiced across the state, the only existing *Mek Mulung* group is found in the village of Wang Tepus, Kedah. There is only one *Wayang Kulit Gedek*, which is performed in the village of Asun in Kedah, not very far from the Thai border. In the village of Chuping, in the neighboring state of Perlis, there is only one *Awang Batil*. It is not known why such isolated phenomena occur like this in the northern states of Malaysia.

## **2.4 *Mek Mulung*, Kedah's One-of-a-Kind Gem**

This section discusses the background of *Mek Mulung* in terms of the various myths and versions associated with its origin, its role in the lives of the Wang Tepus community, and early documentation of its existence. Aspects of its performance, such as the nature of its traditional presentation, performing space, and the practitioners who make up the troupe membership, are also discussed.

### **2.4.1 The *Mek Mulung* Performers of Wang Tepus**

The *Mek Mulung* performance has been an important part of the lives of the people of Wang Tepus for more than six generations (Jabatan Muzium & Antikuiti, 2002). At the present time, a single troupe of performers exists, whose members come from the same family lineage. Troupe members acknowledge that coming from the same family lineage has made it easier for them to learn the art (Wong, 2008). According to Ghulam-Sarwar (2004), “a single group has been performing *Mek Mulung* since the genre's inception” (p. 81), whereby the performances were passed from one generation to the next within the same family lineage (Ahmad, 1976; Ghulam-Sarwar, 1994; Mohd Ghazali, 1995; Mohd Ghouse, 2015; Rahmah, 1979).

### 2.4.2 Performance Functions

The *Mek Mulung* performance has several functions for the people in Wang Tepus. According to Rahmah (2005), *Mek Mulung* can be categorized into two of the five categories she identifies: the “medication, therapy, and cure” type and the “religious and folk belief” type that is performed for ritualistic as well as entertainment functions.<sup>27</sup> In terms of belief systems, *Mek Mulung* has animistic influences, although Rahmah (1979) acknowledges possible overlapping with Malay-Islamic influences.<sup>28</sup> Following a good harvest, *Mek Mulung* is also performed as a form of entertainment and celebration to express the villagers’ gratitude for their good fortune (Ahmad, 1976; Siti Fatimah, 2009; Raja Syahriar, 2010). The annual *Sembah Guru* (homage to ancestors) performance is performed as a tribute for ensuring the village and the inhabitants are protected from bad omens befalling upon them (Mohd Ghazali, 1995; Wong, 2008). This performance also provides the villagers with opportunities to seek treatment for various kinds of spirit-related ailments from a shaman (healer) who goes into a trance during these performances (Mohamad Luthfi, 2011; 2016).<sup>29</sup>

### 2.4.3 Written and Recorded Sources

The earliest mention of a *Mek Mulung* performance in written sources, to my knowledge, is in Walter William Skeat’s *Malay Magic* published in 1900. Skeat began writing this book during his service as an Assistant District Officer, and then District Officer, from 1891 to 1897 in Kuala Langat, a district in the state of Selangor in central

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<sup>27</sup> The other three categories are: ceremonies & ceremonials of rite of passage; birth & death rites; social happening (Rahmah, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Toh (2006) also sees the animistic influences and its ritualistic, healing, and entertainment functions (p. 69).

<sup>29</sup> A healing component within a traditional Malay theatre performance “almost always culminate with the performers and some audience members going into a trance ... which can be considered to be the climax of the traditional theatre form” (Solehah, 2008, p. 53).



Peninsular Malaysia (Gullick, 1988). In addition to *Malay Magic*, his other major publication is *Pagan Races of the Malay Peninsula* (Skeat, 1906) “which was the last of his major works on Malayan subjects written in this period of his life” (Gullick, p.129). A list of his other published works which began in 1892 gained him recognition as an expert on Malayan subjects, contributed to the teaching of anthropology, and helped shape the field of “Malay Studies”. According to Gullick (1988), “Skeat’s journal is one of the best ethnographic accounts we have of the Malay way of life, as it was at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in a part of Malaya (in the cultural sense) where the forces of change had so far made little impact” (pp. 126-127) whereby he put emphasis on accurate data collection through direct observation and gathering information from his informants (Gullick, p. 132).

Skeat (1900) systematically describes various forms of performing arts known to the Malays in Peninsula Malaya based on his relationship with an informant named “Che Hussin” from Penang (Cohen, 2002; Skeat, 1900). He describes *Mek Mulung* (written as *Mek Mulong*) as probably of Siamese origin and having many similarities with *Mak Yong* in terms of costumes of the performers and instruments used by the musicians, such as the *gendang* (probably a barrel-shaped drum), and an instrument called *b’reng-b’reng*.<sup>30</sup> However, the *rebana* (a framed drum) was used in *Mek Mulung* instead of the *rebab* (a three-stringed spike fiddle) in *Mak Yong*. The performers were eight to fifteen males and females who performed outside a *panggung* (performance hall). In comparison with a long list of stories performed in *Mak Yong*, Skeat (1900) identified *Awang Selamat*<sup>31</sup> and *Malim*

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<sup>30</sup> I have asked some Wang Tepus performers, including Pak Saad and Abang Mat, sometime in 2016 if they knew what *b’reng-b’reng* was; but none was sure what musical instrument Skeat was referring to. My best guess is probably it refers to the *kecerekek*, since there were times when I heard performers referred the *kecerekek* as “*krek krek*” by the sound it makes.

<sup>31</sup> Based on current understanding, *Awang Selamat* refers to a character in a story, not a title of a story.

*Bongsu*<sup>32</sup> as the only two stories that were performed in *Mek Mulung* (pp. 518-519).

Another early record of a *Mek Mulung* performance is a documented account of *Mek Mulung* being commissioned by the then Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Abdul Hamid, to have it performed as a part of a “native entertainment” event at the Malaya-Borneo Exhibition in 1922 in Singapore (“Malaya-Borneo Exhibition”, 1922; “Malaya-Borneo Exhibition: The Native Entertainments”, 1922). The Exhibition opened on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1922, and *Mek Mulung* was among other performance genres that were presented by the state of Kedah, such as the *Wayang Kulit* and *Hathera* (probably referring to *Hadrah*). According to the program listed in the Straits Times, dated 5 April 1922, the *Mek Mulung* was performed at 7:30 pm with admission charges of 20 and 30 cents (Malaya-Borneo Arts and Crafts Section of Exhibition, 1922).<sup>33</sup> Among the distinguished guests who attended the Exhibition was England’s Prince of Wales. This demonstrated that *Mek Mulung* had already been officially recognized by the then ruler as one of the traditional performance genres of Kedah with sufficient prestige to represent the state to the ruling power.

The next group of written records of *Mek Mulung* appeared very much later, in post-independent Malaysia in the 1970s and 1980s. The momentum began with a series of newspaper and magazine editorials in the early part of the seventies. A short article in the Malay-language newspaper *Berita Harian* in 1971 mentions *Mek Mulung* being regularly performed among the villagers of Kampung Kota Mengkuang, in Kubang Pasu

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<sup>32</sup> The story of *Malim Bongsu* is elaborated in Appendix D.

<sup>33</sup> The value of 20 and 30 cents at that time was probably a lot. I was not able to get an actual consensus to get an idea of how much 20 cents was in terms of the average purchasing power. However, Paul Kratoska (2009) writes that, “(i)n 1918 the Controller of Rice Mills calculated that based on rice yields in Malaysia, a wage laborer ...working 300 days per year the then prevailing wage of 40 cents per day earned \$120 per year and paid about \$13.50 - \$15.50 for a year’s supply of rice”(p. 287). The author also wrote from a description from a Teochiu immigrant can make \$100 per year. British officials on the other hand were paid from \$1,500 per year depending on the rank. The currency in Malaysia then was Straits Dollar. In 1933 the price of a Japanese bicycle tyre retailed at about 40 cents (Jin & Kyoko, 1984). The Straits Times newspaper the day the performance was advertised was priced at 10 cents.

district, Kedah from one generation to another (Jusoh, 1971). At present, there is no source yet to establish evidence of the exact location of this village, but information from several independent blogposts suggest the possibility that it could have been a part of, or even what used to be, today's village of Wang Tepus (Jungle Gold, 2009; Zahari, 2014).

Other writings on *Mek Mulung* in the 1970s and 1980s include a section from a periodical, *Mastika* (Omar, 1973), article by Ahmad (1976), a Master's thesis by Ku Zam Zam (1978), chapters in an edited book by Ku Zam Zam (1979) and Rahmah (1979), a journal article by Matusky (1985), and a newspaper piece in *The Straits Times* discussing *Mek Mulung* as a Kedahan specialty (Abdul Aziz, 1986). Documentations during these two decades dealt largely with brief introductions to the history of *Mek Mulung*, the nature of the performance itself, and description of the musical instruments. In Ku Zam Zam's thesis, there is greater coverage of who the performers were at that time, with information on their age, occupation, and their role in the *Mek Mulung* performance. An archived recording of *Mek Mulung* by Matusky (1982) is available in the Ethnographic Video for Instruction and Analysis (EVIA) Digital Archives.<sup>34</sup> Although the excerpts were brief, the recordings help shape an understanding of how *Mek Mulung* was performed at that time. These writings only offer descriptive accounts of *Mek Mulung*, and usually highlight only a small portion of the performance.

More recent literature (refer section 1.3 in Chapter One) includes a Master's thesis by Toh (2004) on the music and movement of *Mek Mulung*, and her article on *Mek Mulung*'s music and musical instruments (Toh, 2006). There is also a brief introduction in the *Encyclopaedia of Malaysia: Performing Arts* (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2004) as well as in the *Garland Handbook of Southeast Asian Music* (Miller, 2008). Some of the basic music

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<sup>34</sup> <http://eviada.webhost.iu.edu/Scripts/default.cfm> (Accessed 12 May 2019).

and dance movements of *Mek Mulung* are described in Mohd Ghouse's books titled *Malay Dance* published in 1995, and *Teater Tradisional Melayu* in 2003. The latest book written on *Mek Mulung* is a coffee table book published by the *Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia*–ITBM (Malaysian Institute of Translation & Books) (Zinnitulniza, 2014) which was launched on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2014 by the Chief Minister of the State of Kedah in conjunction with the declaration of *Mek Mulung* as the state performing arts heritage of Kedah. (Refer to section 1.2 in Chapter One).

#### **2.4.4 Origins and Myths**

There is no strong evidence to date for the origin of *Mek Mulung* (Matusky, 1985; Matusky & Tan, 2012). According to the elders in the *Mek Mulung* performance troupe, the *Mek Mulung* tradition is believed to have its roots in Kedah, but at one point in time it was brought to Ligor, now known as Nakhon Si Thammarat, in southern Thailand (Eddy Aizad, 2011).<sup>35</sup> This theory suggests that it has existed for more than 500 years and that Ligor is the place where *Mek Mulung* is believed to have been developed into its proper theatre form (*Mek Mulung*, 2003; Mohamad Luthfi, 2011, 2016; Mohamad Nazri, 1998; seniman\_nunui, 2008; Shazryn, 2010) before it made its return to Kedah. The elders believe that when the Kedah-Siam war broke out in 1821, the *Mek Mulung* troupe returned to Kedah, settling temporarily in several places along the way before finally making their permanent home in Wang Tepus. (Refer to section 2.1 in this Chapter). According to written accounts, on his way back from Bangkok in 1865, the Kedah ruler, Sultan Ahmad Tajuddin II, travelled to Ligor to meet and help facilitate the return of Kedah Malays who had been deported there earlier by the Raja of Ligor (Gullick, 1985). Another suggestion

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<sup>35</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah (refer section 1.7.1 in Chapter One).

is that *Mek Mulung* could have originated from Pattani, Southern Thailand (Matusky, 1985) which has a large Malay population.

Various myths have been associated with the origin of *Mek Mulung* as a performing arts tradition (Mohd Ghouse, 2003; Mohammad Luthfi, 2011). According to Mohd Ghouse (2003), there have been six different versions with a common thread among them concerning a family whose daughter had special musical abilities. In a recorded interview with Salleh Embut,<sup>36</sup> or more popularly known as Pak Leh, then one of the elders and a leader of the troupe who has since died, the *Mek Mulung* origin story involves a couple who had been childless for a very long time. After years of longing for a child, the wife finally became pregnant. On the day the wife was to deliver her baby, the husband went out to search for a midwife. Knowing that the child to be born would possess magical powers, a midwife known as *Tok Bidan Ketujuh* (The Seventh Midwife) suddenly appeared and offered to help deliver the baby. As the child was growing up, from an early age she showed great musical ability and a special interest in dancing. The song, Kecil Milik (Small Possessions), which she created and sang, was her favorite. (Refer to Appendix E for full song text and translation). The father then formed a troupe so that she would be able to sing together with others, while retelling myths and legends.

Another version relates to a tale about the youngest of seven daughters of the King of Ligor who was sent to exile in the forest with the belief that the princess would bring misfortune to the kingdom (Ghulam-Sarwar, 1994; *Mek Mulung*, 2003; Mohamad Luthfi, 2011, 2016; Mohd Ghouse, 2003; Omar, 1973). The princess enjoyed the songs and dances of her maid who entertained her to help overcome her sadness growing up in the forest away from her family. Soon the princess learned the songs and dances, and became

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<sup>36</sup> Interview by Zamzuriah with Pak Leh, 30 September 2009. Transcription by the author.

good enough to be able to perform with the troupe to the public in various villages. Upon reaching the village of Wang Tepus, the princess and her troupe were so grateful for their warm reception by the villagers that they finally decided to make Wang Tepus their permanent home.

Still another version is of a poor farm family who made a living by entertaining audiences with their music (Ahmad, 1976; Mohamed Luthfi, 2011, 2016; Mohd Ghazali, 1995; Mohd Ghouse, 2003). Each member of the family contributed as a member of the performance troupe by making and playing different musical instruments. The father, Pak Mohor, made a *geduk* which is similar to the music produced by the *Menora*. The mother, on the other hand, built *gendang* which she played following the style of the *Mak Yong*. Meanwhile, the daughter, Mek Julung, made a *rebana* which she played according to the style of the *Hadrah*. Mek Julung enjoyed playing the *rebana* and would play it as she travelled all over the village until she landed in the forest whereupon she encountered a young prince who was in exile. The young prince was so impressed by Mek Julung's music that he decided to join the group playing music together with additional musical instruments. The group became accepted by the villagers and soon became recognized as their *Mek Mulung* group.

In the discussion above, two aspects that keep recurring in the different versions of *Mek Mulung* are the focus on the daughter as the main character in the story and the preference for number seven in the story line. None of the Wang Tepus performers could give an explanation when I brought up this question to them. Similarly, Zamzuriah admitted noticing the recurrence of the number seven, but she also does not know of its significance. Winstedt's (1925) discussion of Siva and the Hindu gods, with reference to a white genie or *jinn*, offers a possible connection whereby he suggests the association of

number seven in Muslim-Hindu Malay magical beliefs. Winstedt writes, “(a) white genie, ‘jewel of the world’, lives in the sun and guards the gates of the sky. He has a brother with seven heads, king of all jinn. This white genie, is entitled Maharaja Dewa, a Malay corruption of Mahadeva, the blue-throated Siva” (p. 8). Winstedt continues that “(m)uslim cosmogony definitely places the earth on a bull with forty horns having seven thousand branches, a beast whose body stretches from east to west. So, the Kelantan magician invokes ‘the father and chief of all jinn practicing austerity in the stall of the black bull who supports the fans and shakes the world” (1925, p. 10). The notion of the king jinn having seven children may relate to the Islamic concept of heaven comprising of seven layers. The number seven also appears in paddy farming rituals practiced by the Malays in Kedah and the neighboring state of Perak as well as among the *Sakai* aboriginal community.

With regard to the greater likelihood of a female, typically a daughter, as the main character in the story line, and mythical confrontations of kings and poor folks, *Mek Mulung* stories could have Buddhist and Hindu influences from Wang Tepus’ proximity to Thailand and the Bujang Valley, respectively. According to R. O. Winstedt (1920), many of the Malay folk tales developed or were adapted from myths with Buddhist Jataka and Persian origins. (Refer discussion in section 2.2 in this Chapter).

## **2.5 Key Informants of *Mek Mulung***

There are several key players in the *Mek Mulung* ensemble. All of them play specific roles and none of them have full knowledge of other performers’ roles. I have identified four main performers who served as my key informants based on the

consistency and length of years they had been performing in the group. However, other performers' inputs were also important in providing supporting data.

### **2.5.1 Saad bin Taib**

Saad bin Taib or Pak Saad (Figure 2.3) has been the leader of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* troupe since 1986, and became my main informant throughout the study (Refer to section 1.7.1 in Chapter One). It was a shocking news to me when I was informed of his recent demise on 16<sup>th</sup> March 2019 due to liver failure. According to his death certificate, he was born on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1947; thus, short of several months before his 72<sup>nd</sup> birthday at the time of his death.



Figure 2.3: Saad bin Taib (or Pak Saad). (Photograph taken by the author in 2018).



Pak Saad was my first point of contact when I began my study and fieldwork with *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus. In an interview in 2011, he mentioned that he started to learn *Mek Mulung* while in his early teens and grew up watching his father perform. He started performing with the troupe when he was about twelve years old. During one of the later interviews, he mentioned that at one time, “he (referring to his father) touches my body, but I cannot recall what he actually said. From that moment onwards, I learnt to play the *gendang* (drum). As time went by, I got better playing the drum. It just came on its own”.<sup>37</sup> The phrase “it just came on its own” implies that there was no formal apprenticeship involved. Pak Saad learnt the drum patterns through observation and rote learning.

Pak Saad’s father was the previous troupe leader, from whom he took over upon his death in 1986. As the leader and drum player, he is responsible for the running of the group and conducting the ritual aspects of the performance. Following a stroke, he began to have problems with his eyesight, until he became completely blind in 2014. Following the recommendation of the Kedah state Heritage Department, the government of Malaysia awarded him the National Heritage Living People award in 2015, in recognition of his contribution as the leader of the *Mek Mulung* troupe (Figure 2.4).

### 2.5.2 Salleh bin Embut

Salleh bin Embut or Pak Leh (Figure 2.5), until he passed away in 2010, was the regular performer who played the *Raja*, the lead role in *Mek Mulung* performances. As a troupe member, he shared part of his knowledge of performing the role of the *Raja* with

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<sup>37</sup> Pak Saad’s exact words, “... dia pegang badan saya tuh ..., apa dia kata tuh saya tak tau lak tuh ... Saya pun belajaq pukoi gendang, belajaq pukoi gendang ... lama-lama koi boleh main lah kiranya. Dia mai sendiri”. Interview with Pak Saad on 18th March 2018, in Wang Tepus from Zamzuriah’s personal collection. Transcribed by the author,



Figure 2.4: Certificate accompanying the National Heritage Living Person award.  
(Photograph taken by the author).

Abang Mat, who currently performs the *Raja* character. Pak Leh knew most of the story lines better than any other performer in the village, and these have been recorded by Zamzuriah some time in 2009 while she was learning from him.<sup>38</sup> He started performing in *Mek Mulung* as a dancer, then progressed to playing the *Puteri* role, until he finally

<sup>38</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah sometime in early 2011.



Figure 2.5: Salleh Bin Embut (or Pak Leh)  
 (Pictured with Marie-Andrée Couillard, a Canadian researcher with  
 Universiti Sains Malaysia in the 1980s).  
 (Photograph courtesy of Marie-Andrée Couillard; used with her  
 permission).

played the *Raja*. He mentioned that he was from a nearby village, and had come from a family lineage of *Mak Yong* performers. In a recorded interview, Zamzuriah asked Pak Leh about his father to which he replied, “Umhh, my father used to perform *Mak Yong*. There is no more *Mak Yong* around, the performers have all passed on”.<sup>39</sup> Pak Leh learned to dance *Mek Mulung* from a troupe member Bakaq bin Man until Bakaq passed on. Pak Leh started learning *Mek Mulung* in his late teens and started performing when he was

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<sup>39</sup> Pak Leh’s words, “Umhh... ayah Pak Leh dulu jadi orang *Mak Yong*. Tak dak dah *Mak Yong*, depa habih tak dak”. From recorded interview by Zamzuriah, with Pak Leh in 2009. Transcription by the author.

about twenty years old. All the dates regarding Pak Leh are from personal communication and recordings in Zamzuriah's collection. It was unfortunate that I did not have the opportunity to meet Pak Leh before he passed away in 2010.

### 2.5.3 Ahmad bin Shahadan

Ahmad bin Shahadan or Abang Mat, who is one of the late Pak Leh's students, performs the *Raja* roles in the Wang Tepus troupe. He had a late start learning *Mek Mulung*, after completing his skill training at the National Craft Institute sometime in the early 1980s.<sup>40</sup> He is now in his fifties and suffers from tuberculosis. Abang Mat is a carpenter and makes commissioned woodwork pieces such as birdcages. He lives next door to Pak Saad, and their houses overlook the *bangsal* or performance space. One of Pak Saad's sons, Halim, is currently learning to perform from Abang Mat, but the training is infrequent. Not long before Pak Saad's passing, Abang Mat became interested to teach his knowledge of *Mek Mulung* to his youngest son. (This will be elaborated in the next section).

As a professional craftsman, Abang Mat's house is usually filled with many of the villagers who came to use his crafting equipment. These villagers were also performers (although not frequently active) or who have had some form of association/relationship with performers, and thus have knowledge of *Mek Mulung* performance. For example, one of the villagers who was at Abang Mat's house during one of my interview sessions revealed that his father was a member of the performance troupe but had died before he was ten years old.<sup>41</sup> Besides relating memories of their experiences with those who had

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<sup>40</sup> Personal communication with Abang Mat in May 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Personal communication with Abdullah Rani's son who was present at Abang Mat's house during some of the interviews from 2017-2018. Abdul Rani was previously a drum player in the 1990s

performed *Mek Mulung* or those who had knowledge of *Mek Mulung*, they also shared information with me about events and their contributions to these events, such as sharing photographs. While the interviews were conducted, or conversations were taking place, Abang Mat could be working on his favorite craft projects, like making bird cages.

#### **2.5.4 Kamarusdin bin Debak**

Kamarusdin bin Debak (henceforth Pak Din) is among the later members in the same troupe with Pak Saad. He is the *serunai* player and is now is in his early sixties. Pak Din learnt to play the *serunai* from his father who belonged to a northern performance ensemble, the *Gendang Keling*. Currently, Pak Din is the only person in the Wang Tepus troupe who is able play the *Mek Mulung serunai* pieces. He had no formal training in playing the *serunai* and claimed that it came on its own when he was about twelve years old.<sup>42</sup> According to Pak Saad, Pak Din does not come from the direct lineage of the *Mek Mulung* tradition.<sup>43</sup>

After being in the village for several years, I had observed that Pak Din's son showed some interest in playing the *serunai*; but he had little opportunity to have his father sit down together with him and teach him directly. I decided to get my own *serunai* and told Pak Din that, his son and I would learn to play the *serunai* together. The *serunai* is a difficult instrument to master which involves circular blowing. Pak Din's teaching method which lacks real pedagogy skills made the lessons in his house dependent mostly on a trial-and-error learning approach. The *serunai* is an instrument which produces relatively loud sounds and has hardly any dynamics, which discouraged me from practicing at home

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<sup>42</sup> Personal communication with Pak Din on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2012.

<sup>43</sup> Recorded interview made available by Zamzuriah on 18 March 2018.

because of the disturbance it could create.<sup>44</sup> But, the learning sessions for Pak Din's son and I continued, although very infrequently (Figure 2.6).



Figure 2. 6: Pak Din teaching his son playing the *serunai*. (Photograph taken by the author in 2017).

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<sup>44</sup> To help me understand the *serunai* a little bit more, I had some help from a member of the National Traditional Orchestra who helped me with the blowing exercises. However, I was only able to have two, two-hour classes; nevertheless, it did help me learn about some *serunai* techniques.

## 2.6 *Mek Mulung* as a Folk/Village Theatre Performance

The elements in the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* performance are discussed in this section. This includes the performance space, the characters, costumes and props, as well as musical instruments.

### 2.6.1 The Performance Space

The space for performing *Mek Mulung* in the traditional village setting is called the *bangsal* (Figure 2.7). It is a semi-permanent open stage structure built on the ground with a roof supported by bamboo pillars. Only one side of the *bangsal*, towards the back, is walled up. A *para* (platform), which serves as an altar, is built so that it is attached on



Figure 2.7: The *bangsal* in Wang Tepus, taken during the *Sembah Guru* performance in 2011. (Photograph taken by the author).



the inside of this back wall. On this altar are placed the offerings for the annual *Sembah Guru* performance. The *bangsal* is positioned so that the back wall faces north and thus the offerings are also facing north. In the middle of the *bangsal* towards the front of the altar is the main pillar, or the *tiang seri* (Figure 2.8) which is believed to be the site where the spirits make their presence felt during the performance. Thus, it has a special function and serves as the focal point for the players throughout the performance. The bright colored paper decorating the *bangsal* has no specific meaning. On occasions when there is no colored paper available, newspapers can be used for decorations.



Figure 2.8: The *tiang seri* (spiritual pillar) in the *bangsal* decorated with coconut and areca nut flowers. (Photograph taken by the author).



### 2.6.2 The Theatre Characters

The performance is comprised of a cast of male and female characters. In the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* village performance, female roles are played by men who dress up in female clothing, or young girls. The main character, the *Raja* (the King), who is also referred to as *Pak Mulung*, usually makes his appearance with his male servants, known as *Awang*. These servants include the *Peran Tua*, *Peran Muda*, and *Peran Kiau*, who usually play comic characters. The lead female character known as the *Puteri* (the Princess) usually makes her appearance in the company of her maids, called *Inang*. Similar to the *Awang* characters, the *Inangs* also provide comic acts to the performance. Other supporting characters include a soothsayer known as *Tok Wak* (the Old Sage) and *Raja Gergasi* (the Ogre King), or kings from other kingdoms who make their appearance in some of the epic stories.

### 2.6.3 Costumes and Props

In the village, *Mek Mulung* performances do not require special or elaborate costumes (Figure 2.9). The *Raja* wears traditional Malay attire with a headgear called the *tengkolok*, and a *sampin* which is a skirt-like garment worn over trousers. The *Awangs* are dressed in a *sarung* or *kain pelikat* with or without a shirt top. They may also perform in their everyday clothes. The *Puteri* wears traditional Malay clothing, which can be a *baju kurung* or a *baju kebaya* complete with a *sarung*. The *Inangs* wear a *sarung* and a headscarf. The musicians also wear their own everyday clothes.



Figure 2.9: Costumes worn by the *Raja* (left) and the *Awang* (right). (Photograph taken by Marie-Andree Couillard in 1980; used with her permission).

Very few and simple props are used in *Mek Mulung* performances. Wooden red masks are worn by the *Awang* which cover half of the face exposing only the mouth and chin (Figure 2.10). Each *Awang* also carries a *golok* (dagger) (Figure 2.11). *Tok Wak*'s mask is a full mask and black in color (Figure 2.12). The *Tok Wak* has a short walking stick, the *tongkat wak*. Both the *Raja* and the *Puteri* have whips that are made from seven strips of rattan that are bunched together known as the *rotan ketujuh*. The maids do not have any props.



Figure 2.10: Masks worn by the *Awang*. (Photograph taken by the author).



Figure 2.11: Dagger carried by *Awang* with a carving of a human head.  
(Photograph taken by the author).



Figure 2.12: Mask worn by *Tok Wak*. (Photograph taken by the author).

#### 2.6.4 Musical Instruments

The *Mek Mulung* musical ensemble (Figures 2.13 and 2.14) features as its main melodic instrument a *serunai* (a free reed aerophone), which plays the main melody of the instrumental pieces. If the *serunai* is then followed by a piece from the sung repertoire, the *serunai* will stop playing. The rhythm section consists of three types of membranophones, frame drums of different sizes. The largest frame drum, called the *gendang ibu*, plays the main beat. Through improvisations, the *gendang anak* and the *semborong* produce intricate rhythms. A *gong* and a pair of bamboo clappers called the





Figure 2.13: The music ensemble 1. From left: *serunai*, *gong*, *gendang ibu*. (Photograph taken by Marie-Andree Couillard in 1980 in Wang Tepus; used with her permission).

*kecerek* serve as timekeepers (Ahmad, 1976; Ku Zam Zam, 1979; Matusky & Chopyak, 2008; Mohamad Luthfi, 2011). Like most Southeast Asian ensembles, the beat is end accented. The contemporary troupe comprised fifteen to twenty performers and musicians (Ku Zam Zam, 1979; Mohamad Luthfi, 2011; Mohd Ghouse, 2003; Siti Fatimah, 2009). Previously, there were two additional instruments, a small-knobbed gong called *mong* (an idiophone gong chime) and a *canang*, a metalaphone-type instrument.

### 2.6.5 Stock Stories

There are several stories which are incorporated into the performance of the *Mek Mulung* theatre (See Appendix D). These stories are passed down from generation to generation without the emergence of new stories up to the present time. Zaleha (1975)



Figure 2.14: The music ensemble 2. From left: *gendang ibu*, *gendang ibu*, *gendang anak*, *semborong*, *kecerak*. (Photograph taken by Marie-Andree Couillard in Wang Tepus in 1980; used with her permission).

was informed by the late Pak Taib, whose son, Pak Saad, the leader of the current troupe, that there were about twelve stories that used to be told traditionally. Among these were *Malim Bongsu*, *Cahaya Bulan*, *Puteri Dua Belas Beradik* or *Lakon Aperot*, *Dewa Kaca*, *Batak Putih*, *Lakon Tok Raja Besar*, and *Memburu Rusa*. Out of the twelve stories, only about five or six stories were still performed in the 1970s. The late Pak Leh reported in an interview with Zamzuriah<sup>45</sup> that he could only remember four stories from a list drawn up by the National Museum. These four stories, which have remained the regular stories performed in current *Mek Mulung* presentations, are *Malim Bongsu*, *Dewa Kaca*, *Cahaya Bulan*, and *Dewa Muda*. In the same interview, Pak Leh reported that the most frequently performed were the *Cahaya Bulan* and *Malim Bongsu*. Zamzuriah recalls that the *Dewa*

<sup>45</sup> Recorded interview by Zamzuriah with Pak Leh in 2009. Transcription by the author.

*Muda* story was remembered only as fragments. *Cahaya Bulan* is by far the most commonly performed story in *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus today. In an interview, the current main performer, Halim<sup>46</sup> recalled that Abang Mat has been seen to perform only in *Cahaya Bulan*.

*Dewa Kaca* is a story about the struggles that couples go through in a marriage. In the past, this story was often performed during wedding ceremonies. It served as a reminder to the bride and groom to be cautious of rumours and to investigate before jumping to conclusions and misguided actions. A very simplistic narration of the *Dewa Kaca* was provided by Pak Leh during an interview with Zamzuriah.<sup>47</sup> A longer and fuller version of the *Dewa Kaca* story was reported by Zaleha (1975). My comparison of the two versions shows that the current storyline provided by Pak Leh retains approximately only about one-third of the original story line reported by Zaleha in 1975.

A possible reason for this loss is that it is common practice to make the stories shorter and simpler, as there is no pressure to complete the storyline in *Mek Mulung* performances. A good performance is more likely to be measured in terms of the ability of the performers to improvise jokes so as to add humor to the story. Another reason is that, performances during wedding events have a limited time frame rather than the normal performances in Wang Tepus which can last up to three nights. To accommodate to the tight timeframe, performances have to be shortened, which result in the entire stories not getting told. When particular parts of the story get omitted often enough, these parts finally become forgotten and sometimes leading to shortened story lines. A specific case relating to this can be deduced from the response I get from Abang Mat to the story of *Mek Mulung*

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<sup>46</sup> Personal communication with Pak Saad's son, Halim, at Senawi Omar's (henceforth Pak Awie) house in Wang Tepus, June 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Recorded interview by Zamzuriah with Pak Leh, 30 September 2009. Transcription by the author.

*Dewa Kaca*. Zaleha (1975) recorded the complete story of *Dewa Kaca* which was related to her by Pak Taib (Refer to Section 2.6.5 in this Chapter). Personally, I have no knowledge of the *Dewa Kaca* story beyond what I have seen from current performances. So, I forwarded this story with accompanying photographs through WhatsApp to Abang Mat to get his reaction. His response was that he now understands why he felt the *Dewa Kaca* story was not well developed because of the weaknesses in the story lines. His explanation was that Pak Leh could not have remembered the whole story and some story lines were unintentionally left out during the transmission.<sup>48</sup> Thus, from his response, I realize that Abang Mat was not aware that the current story that is being performed, which has many parts of the story line being omitted, is incomplete and portrays only a part of a longer story. And such cases can possibly happen to other *Mek Mulung* stories as well.

## **2.7 Performing *Mek Mulung***

The process of performing *Mek Mulung* is discussed in the following section which includes its flow and characteristics. This includes the performance structure, performance style, and musical style. A *Sembah Guru* ritual is also presented here.

### **2.7.1 Performance structure**

*Mek Mulung* is performed following a distinctive performance structure (Mohd Ghouse, 2003) consisting of pre-opening rituals (*upacara persediaan*), prologues (*pembukaan*), the main storyline (*penceritaan*), an epilogue (*penutup*), and post-

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<sup>48</sup> I communicated via WhatsApp with Abang Mat on 29<sup>th</sup> April 2017 to inquire if he could have suspected the story would be longer than what is being currently presented in performances. The text of Abang Mat's response is, "Terima kasih baru Abg Mat faham cerita dewa kaca yang abang mat rasa ada cacat cela rasa tak berapa kemas. Mungkin Pak Salleh tak berapa ingat sebab tuh dia cerita kat kita tak cukup jalan cerita terima kasih Ti".



performance rituals/healing ritual (*upacara berubat*).<sup>49</sup> This fixed sequence of performance structure is practiced in the Wang Tepus village performances.<sup>50</sup> For the *Sembah Guru* performance, this is repeated for all three nights the celebration take place. A *lupa* or *menurun* (trance) section is added at the end of the performance on the final night if it is the *Sembah Guru*, or a healing ceremony. The flow of the performance structure is presented in the diagram in Figure 2.15. Based on responses from interviews throughout the study, and from my own observation of the actual performance, the flow structure of *Mek Mulung* village performance was consistent with what is summarized in Figure 2.15. To elaborate the performance structure, I am using the DVD recording of the *Sembah Guru* performance in Wang Tepus which I had witnessed in 2011.<sup>51</sup>

The pre-performance ritual starts with a *Buka Panggung*, a ritual that is performed by a designated group member with the knowledge of the ritual. Pak Saad usually does this ritual although one of his sons, Mat Nayan, can perform the *Buka Panggung*. The ritual properties are only known to the selected practitioners. More recently in the middle of 2018, Pak Saad decided to pass on this ritual knowledge, and thus the authority to perform *Buka Panggung*, to Kamarul Baisah who is Zamzuriah's husband. This is considered an unusual situation as Kamarul Baisah has never been a member of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* performance troupe, nor is he a descendant of the *Mek Mulung* family

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<sup>49</sup> The structure of the performance is divided into the following sections. Pre-Opening, Opening, Servants are Summoned, Story Introduction (*Pecah Lakon*), Closing, Post-Closing, Trance. (Nur Izzati, 2014).

<sup>50</sup> Solehah (2008) and Ghulam-Sarwar (2009) agree that one of the common traits shared by traditional theater forms is the rituals of *pembinaan panggung* (constructing the stage), *buka panggung* (opening the stage) and *tutup panggung* (closing the stage).

<sup>51</sup> This was the only full *Sembah Guru* performance that I had witnessed in the village. The National Film Development Corporation (FINAS) was the main sponsor of the *Sembah Guru* performance in 2011 which was filmed as a documentary on *Mek Mulung*. However, it is yet to be aired on national television. The last time a *Sembah Guru* performance took place in Wang Tepus was in 2014 in conjunction with the launching of the coffee table book on *Mek Mulung* which was produced by the Malaysian Institute of Translation and Books (ITBM – *Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia*). It is unfortunate that I did not get to see the performance as I was not informed and thus not aware of the event. Similarly, Zamzuriah was also not aware of the event and thus did not witness the performance.

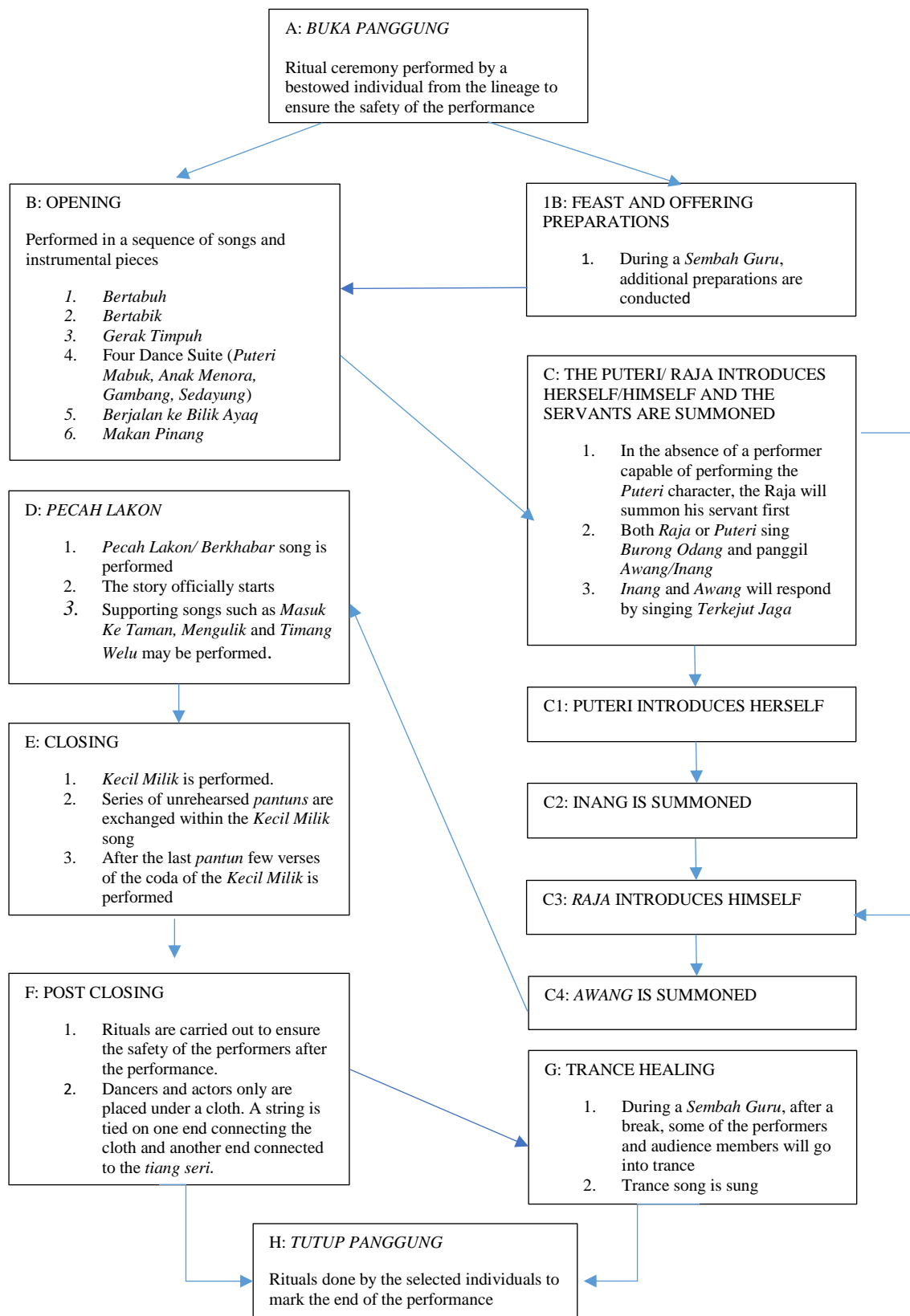


Figure 2.15: The performance structure (Adapted from Nur Izzati, 2014).

lineage. My best explanation is that Zamzuriah is well respected as a *Mek Mulung* expert by the Wang Tepus performers and committed to the *Mek Mulung* tradition. However, being a female, she may not be an appropriate choice to conduct the necessary rituals during the *Buka Panggung*. So, giving her husband the special ritual knowledge and practices is their acknowledgement of her special position among them. The *Buka Panggung* ritual can be carried out elsewhere besides the performance space. If the performance is a *Sembah Guru* event, there is additional preparation for the offering altar which is prepared during the daytime before the performance starts at night. (Refer to sections 2.6.1 and 2.7.4 in this Chapter).

As the musicians begin to gather, usually an hour after the last compulsory Muslim prayers for the evening, the performance begins with an instrumental piece, Bertabuh to signal the start of the performance. (This is shown in the DVD clip from the beginning of Disc 5a at 0:00 until 2:44. With the instrumental music in the background, Pak Saad recites some incantations while facing a lighted candle at the *tiang seri*).<sup>52</sup> The musicians sit at the periphery inside the *bangsal*, forming a semi-circle with their back facing the *tiang seri*. Other performers and some of the audience sit along the periphery of the *bangsal*. The *Raja*, *Puteri*, and one of the dancers are already in the centre of the performance space facing the *tiang seri*. Once the Bertabuh piece ends, the lead character, the *Puteri* or *Raja* continues to sit in the middle of the *bangsal* facing the *tiang seri* with a row of performers seated behind her/him. (At minute 2:45 of Disc 5a, the video resumes after a break when I stopped recording. I was using a Canon DVD camcorder that required me to change discs approximately every 30 minutes).

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<sup>52</sup> The discs are uploaded at <https://izzatiphdsupplementary.blogspot.com>. (Accessed on 13 May 2019).

The next section is a continuous medley of the Bertabik, or the salutation which starts from 2:45 in Disc 5a, which is followed by Gerak Timpuh which starts from Disc 5a @4:23, and a four-dance suite (beginning from Disc 5a @12:17), and Berjalan ke Bilik Ayaq (beginning from Disc 5a @17:24). The dance part of the performance starts midway during the Gerak Timpuh and continues until Berjalan Ke Bilik Ayaq. After the songs have ended, all the performers except the *Puteri* or the *Raja* retreat to their seats at the periphery of the *bangsal*. The *Puteri* or the *Raja* then proceeds to sing the Makan Pinang (Disc 5b @2:15). At the end of the Makan Pinang song, the *Raja* or *Puteri* transitions to end the opening section by dancing to a Berjalan song (Disc 5b @4:09). The opening section which begins with the Bertabuh until the end of the Makan Pinang song can last between 40 minutes to one hour. The song texts for the performance and their translations are given in Appendix E.<sup>53</sup>

In the next section, the main character (the *Puteri* or the *Raja*) introduces herself/himself and summons their respective servants. Ideally, if the *Puteri* does the opening, she summons her *Inangs* first. During the *Sembah Guru* performance which I witnessed in 2011, there was no one playing the *Puteri* character; so, Pak Saad's son, Halim, who played the *Raja* did the opening. He then proceeded to call upon his clown servants or *Awangs*. The *Puteri* character in that performance was not acted out, instead was only mentioned or narrated. The *Raja* or the *Puteri* calls for their servants first by singing the Burong Odang, which is a polite call to the servants (Disc 5b @6:00). I was not able to record the full song as I needed to change to a new disc. This is then followed by the *Puteri/Raja* singing Panggil Inang/Awang, which is a stronger and harsher call for the servants before they finally make their appearance. After completing the dialogue

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<sup>53</sup> The song texts are from Zamzuriah's personal collection which she had compiled in collaboration with the late Pak Leh, and was later adopted and presented by Abang Mat in the 2017 performance at Universiti Malaya.

between the *Raja* or the *Puteri* with their servants, either character introduces the story by singing the Khabar Bilang (Start of Disc 6a @0:00), after which the actual plot commences.

Within the story, supplementary songs provide additional support to the performance. These include the Mengulit, a lullaby song to a tired king, followed by Masuk ke Taman, a song that is supposedly performed in the garden. The song Lagu Berjalan may then be performed to indicate the characters moving from one place to another. There is an instrumental and a sung version of the Lagu Berjalan. Another song, Timang Welu, may be sung when calling to someone of higher rank, such as the *Puteri* to the *Raja*, *Awang* to the *Raja*, or *Inang* to the *Puteri*.<sup>54</sup> Supplementary songs are not compulsory, but they add to the variety and flavor to the plot during the performance. Once the plot has finished, or the performers decide to stop performing for the night, the Kecil Milik is sung. Figure 2.16 is an excerpt of the Kecil Milik song which was presented by Abang Mat during the 2017 *Mek Mulung* performance at Universiti Malaya.

The Kecil Milik may be sung by either the *Puteri* or the *Raja*. At the end of the first part of the performance, the performers or anyone in the audience is invited to exchange *pantuns* (sung verses) as a form of showing appreciation to everyone who had stayed to watch the performance. The exchange of *pantuns* may continue throughout the night and the performance only ends when no more *pantuns* are offered. A short coda is sung by the *Raja* or *Puteri* to signal the end of the performance.

After the Kecil Milik song is finished, a ritual is carried out to ensure the safety of the performers. The dancers and the actors sit underneath a cloth that is tied with a string

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<sup>54</sup> This can be heard in the second half of the 1982 *Mek Mulung* recording by Universiti Sains Malaysia at minute 50:20. (USM, 1982).

<p><i>Ayo Cik Milik mengaranglah bunga, Bunga di karang nandung sayang tidak bertali</i></p> <p><i>Tabiklah encik tuan semua Saya nak mintak nandung sayang mohon berhenti</i></p> <p><i>Putihlah bulan tidak melindung Lilit terlilit nandung sayang di kaki dulang</i></p> <p><i>Letihlah lah badan tidak menanggung Tak sabit kulit nandung sayang bercerai tulang</i></p> <p><i>Janganlah tajo jagung petani Jagung petani nandung sayang beru berpagar</i></p> <p><i>Jangan dok ajuk Mek Mulung lah kami Mek Mulung Kami nandung sayang baru belajar</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p>*(Free pantun section)</p> <p><i>Darilah nandung ke pantai Naning Orang bergajah nandung sayang dua beranak</i></p> <p><i>Darilah jauh kami kemari Hendak menumpang nandung sayang orang yang banyak</i></p> <p>.....</p> <p><i>Takboleh ralit dah loka pantun seloka Kami beradu dah guru di bayan guru</i></p> <p><i>Kami buang lah tasik di pusat tasik Pusat tasik dah janji dipauh canggi Jangan menjadi dah reda seksakan reda Jangan menjadi dah papa itulah papa Jangan menjadi lah malin cerai gemalin Kami buang dah tasik di pusat tasik Kami beradu di bayan guru</i></p> <p><i>Radu slalu lah eeeeh</i></p>	<p>Dear Cik Milik (a character that means small possession) composes a flower, The flower composed in a love song has no strings</p> <p>I salute to you everyone I would like to ask in a love song a request to end the performance The white full moon has no shadow, Going around in tangles in a love song in the base of a large tray The body is tired and won't last any more But not skinned in a love song is split from the bone Do not tamper with the corn of the farmer The farmer's corn in a love song has just started to rise Do not mock/look down on our <i>Mek Mulung</i> performance For our <i>Mek Mulung</i> performance in a love song we have just started to learn</p> <p>.....</p> <p>*(Free pantun section)</p> <p>Here comes the serenade to the beach of Naning Elephant riders in a love song and their two children with adorstion We who have come here from afar, Joining along in a love song the company of others</p> <p>.....</p> <p>We can't be enthralled any more by poetry We rested beside the amaranth of knowledge of the elders We removed the lake from the heart of the lake Anchoring on a promise rooted from the sea Let's not disturb the present calm Let's not deprive further of poverty *do not become like the story of Malin We removed the lake from the heart of the lake We rested beside the amaranth of knowledge of the elders Resting along lah eeeeeh</p>
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Figure 2.16: Excerpt from Kecil Milik song.

to the *tiang seri* while the ritual is conducted. If it is a regular performance, Pak Saad would conduct the *Tutup Panggung*, a special ritual to mark the end of the performance. If it is a *Sembah Guru* performance, the ritual is followed by a short break. Then, at some point in time past midnight, the performers gather and sing a song to call upon their ancestors (Begins Disc 6b). Some performers and members of the audience start to go into a trance (Begins Disc 6c). At this point, I was asked to stop recording. Even the crew from FINAS, which sponsored the event, was only allowed very minimal recording of the trance section. It is during this period that members of the community may request for help to heal whatever ailments they might be suffering from. When the healing session has finished, a *Tutup Panggung* ritual is conducted to mark the end of the performance.

The performance structure depicted in Figure 2.15 is based on the sequences identified from observations of the performances in the village *Mek Mulung*, interviews with practitioners themselves, collection of recordings of performances, and results of studies by various researchers. For example, refer Mohd Ghouse (2003), Solehah (2008), and Ghulam-Sarwar (2009) in the early part of this Chapter. The structure is somewhat fixed, in the sense of what comes before and what comes after; however, the content of the storyline changes depending on what story is to be presented. In a recorded interview,<sup>55</sup> Pak Leh indicated the importance of ensuring that the performance order is maintained, which is also emphasized by Abang Mat. In fact, the performance structure provided Zamzuriah with a model to reconstruct the forgotten story of the twelve princesses (refer discussion in section 6.3.3). The structure is not a script but helps the audience to have a sense of the direction of the story in the performance.

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<sup>55</sup> From Zamzuriah's interview with Pak Leh in 2009.

There are some shortcomings in the 2011 performance which can be attributed to various factors related to the troupe members, and consequently the performance itself. Foremost, since his demise the year before, this was the first time that the Wang Tepus performance was carried out without the presence of Pak Leh who has been the key performer of the village *Mek Mulung*. Another significant performer, Abang Mat, was not able to perform as he was terribly ill with his tuberculosis. Thus, Pak Saad's son, Halim, had to step in to play the *Raja* character even though at that time he felt that he was not yet ready to perform with the troupe. As a result, based on his observation, Abang Mat considers the first three days of the event were more regarded as "rehearsals" rather than building story lines toward the climax on the final night. I will describe in greater detail in the following section what took place on the final night of the performance. Another omission is the Kecil Milik closing song which was only realized after the performance had ended. These shortcomings could have been the result of infrequent performances and thus the decreased opportunities for the performers to adequately present their performances.

### **2.7.2 Performance Style**

The performance style of *Mek Mulung* is unrehearsed and relies on the performers' ability to improvise. The performers themselves perform in a casual manner whereby musicians, such as drum players, swap between themselves to take a break in the middle of the performance. Some might leave for a smoke in between the scenes. In the performances I have seen there were instances when performers forgot to sing certain lines or sang them in a different order. This is acceptable, as long as the overall song sequence is in the correct order. According to the village practitioners, Gerak Timpuh, for instance,



would never be performed before the Bertabik. In the Wang Tepus performance, the story does not need to be completed. Sometimes the plot of the story would not be finished/completed which is then followed by the *Raja* or the *Puteri* singing the Kecil Milik (Rahmah, 1979; Saad, 1975) due to time constraint or to enable the next section to commence, such as the healing session.

In Wang Tepus, the performers usually make use of improvisational dialogues which they agreed earlier so as to get an idea about the story line for that particular night's performance. This provides an element of surprise which makes each of the performances unique. The elders believe the success of a particular night's performance relies on the ability of the comic characters to come up with jokes which excite audiences. In an interview with Pak Leh and Pak Saad, Zamzuriah asked which Mek *Mulung* stories are more popular. Their replies are: (with translation)

Pak Leh: *Ah main cerita nih ah, cerita macam biasa cerita nih lah, macam tuh lah cerita. Main khenduri bukan main macam nih sangat. Sikit-sikit ja.*

Oh, performing the stories. The stories are simple, nothing out of the ordinary. Performing at weddings is not much like this (referring to the PPAG performance). It's just very simple.

Pak Saad: *Lawak dia banyak, bagi orang gelak.*

There are a lot of jokes, must be able to make people laugh.

Pak Leh: *Lawak la nih lah.*

It's the current jokes.

Zamzuriah: *Lawak maknanya Raja dengan Awang?*

You mean the jokes between the *Raja* and the *Awang*?

Pak Saad: *Hah, Raja dengan Awang tuh lah lawak banyak.*

Yes, the comedy part between the *Raja* and the *Awang* is plenty.

Pak Leh: *Awang pengasuh dengan Raja tu lah.*

It's the *Awang* with the *Raja*.

Pak Saad: *Dia dok kelakaq buat lagu mana. Bagi orang ramai gelak.*

He keeps on making jokes, there's nothing we can do. Makes the crowd laugh.

Pak Leh: *Tapi kena pandai lah. Kalau orang lawak tuh pun tak pandai, hat yang jadi Raja tuh tak berapa pandai lawak banyak, tak boleh lah.*

But you must be good. If the *Awang* is not good at making jokes and the *Raja* too not very good at making many jokes, this is not good.

The jokes can also be in the form of words that are mistakenly heard. In a recorded interview, Pak Leh explains the *Inang* character in a performance who jokingly pretends not to hear the *Puteri*'s exact word 'istana' (for palace) and instead repeats the word 'sena' (Refer \* in text below).

*Ya lah. Inang dok pangge lah. Ya lah sedang aku umoq lama sangat lama. Saya dok pangge badan Inang kalau gitu ooooooi Inang. (In higher pitch voice). Hai sapa? Ha dok pangge Inang, hai saya Inang oooooi Saya mai mana tuh, pandai bohong. Saya mai anjung istana, oih mai juai bunga sena kah? Tuh bohong la eh.*

Here, the maid I call. Here, I await for you from a time most dear. I have at this point in time I call upon my maid (*Inang*), if it's so oooooo *Inang*. (In high pitch voice) (*Inang*): Who is it? Who is calling upon me? (*Puteri*): It is me, *Inang*. (*Inang*): Me, who? (Pak Leh referring to *Inang*): She is good to fool the *Puteri*. (*Puteri*): I have come from the palace. (*Inang*): Ohh, you have come to sell the *sena* flower?\*(Pak Leh says): These are all tricks ...

Although the performances are improvisational in nature, the performers follow a structure with an established sequence of sections for every performance. This enables

performers as well as the audience to have a sense of where the performance is according to the timeframe. Also, there are mandatory phrases that must be uttered by respective characters. These are referred as *ucap tetap*. These mandatory phrases introduce the *Puteri* or the *Raja* and also show the readiness of the servants to serve their masters. *Ucap tetap* appear in all *Mek Mulung* performances. An example of an *ucap tetap* for a *Raja* to introduce himself and summon his *Awang* in *Mek Mulung Dewa Kaca* performance is given below:

*Ya lah kata batang tubuh saya masa ni ketika ni adalah Dewa Kaca, aku nak panggil awang pengasuh aku, sebab kata hilang kemana ghaib kemana tak dapat aku nak pinjam suruh. Baiklah aku nak panggil dengan kasaq gedegaq takut dia bangkit murka tubuh badan aku, baiklah saya panggil dia dengan halus perlahan.*

Now I shall declare to the world at this point in time, as the Crystalline Deity (*Dewa Kaca*): I desire to call upon my servants, who have gone away elsewhere so that I can't call him to my side immediately. I shouldn't call upon him loudly and imprudently, for he might get angry with me. I shall call upon him gently and patiently.

The dance movements in *Mek Mulung* correspond with the songs in the performance. There are specific dance moves that are expressed in specific songs. During a dance lesson with her,<sup>56</sup> Zamzuriah mentioned that there are certain variations that are unique to an individual. She said that the late Pak Leh favored certain moves in particular songs that slightly differed from how Abang Mat performs them. Like most Southeast Asian traditional dance-dramas, such as the *Mak Yong* and the *Menora*, dances and travelling from one place to another are indicated by movements in a circular pattern. Elaboration of dance movements in *Mek Mulung* beyond the above description is not discussed as the dance element is outside of the scope of this study. My insufficient

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<sup>56</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah at ASWARA, 30 September 2017.

background knowledge and practical exposure to ethnochoreology does not permit me to conduct further constructive analyses of the dance component in *Mek Mulung*. However, I consider it to be an aspect of *Mek Mulung* which I can pursue in the future.

### 2.7.3 Musical Style

The *Mek Mulung* songs are sung in a responsorial style between the solo performer and the chorus. The solo singer can be any of the characters and the musicians and the other performers sing as the chorus. The chorus repeats the soloist's line at the end of the phrase, or there is an overlap. The songs are made up of eight basic motifs which several songs share. Appendix F presents a list of the eight basic motifs in Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*. Appendix G is a chart showing the song titles with their motifs. The form of the songs is strophic such that the melodic motifs are repeated each in verse with changes of the song text. In Figure 2.17 below is an example of a transcription representing Pak Leh in the first staff and Abang Mat in the bottom staff to demonstrate the overlapping responsorial singing. From the transcription, the response from Abang Mat shows that the melody is slightly varied each time it is sung. In a live performance chorus, there may be many of these variations and ornamentations which are performed at once that create a heterophonic effect.

The *gendang ibu* is played for the sung songs and the rhythm section. The *gendang anak* doubles the rhythm of the *gendang ibu* in most songs, except the Berjalan in which it also doubles the *gendang ibu*. The *semporong* provides the base rhythm except during the Berjalan where it also doubles the *gendang ibu*. The *kecerek* is not played during the songs and the gong marks the end of the phrase.



Figure 2.17: Transcription of Pak Leh and Abang Mat singing Burong Odang in 2009 in Wang Tepus. (From Zamzuriah's personal recordings; transcription by the author).<sup>57</sup>

There are three instrumental pieces in *Mek Mulung*, the Bertabuh the four-dance suite, and the instrumental Berjalan. These are the only pieces in which the *serunai* plays the main melody. The *kecerek* is also played in these instrumental pieces. Musical cues in

<sup>57</sup> This excerpt of the recording is uploaded at <https://izzatiphdsupplementary.blogspot.com> (Accessed on 13 May 14, 2019).

*Mek Mulung* performances are given by the performers to begin and end the songs. To begin a Lagu Berjalan, in-between scenes are indicated by the performers uttering “*Jalan slalu*” (I will continue my travel) to cue the musicians to begin the music. To end an instrumental piece or a song, the performers utter a loud “*Ya!*” and the performers stop the music. The musicians perform a coda section to end the performance. Other musical cues include loud uttering of “*Cak Semelut!*” during the first time the *Awang* meets the *Raja*.

#### **2.7.4 Performing *Sembah Guru***

In the case of the *Sembah Guru* performance<sup>58</sup>, a feast is usually held on the final day of the performance. Villagers are expected to gather in the morning to be involved together in the preparation of the meal to be served to guests who will be attending the night’s performance. This feast is meant to celebrate the ancestors of the *Mek Mulung* performers and the village community. Among the local Kedah traditional dishes usually served for the feast are beef curry, dried fish, and herbal salad (*ulam*) (Mohamad Luthfi, 2016). While preparation for the feast is taking place, Tok Chah, an elderly woman known to have the knowledge and skills, is assigned to appropriately prepare the necessary offerings to be displayed on the *para* (altar or platform) in the *bangsal*. Among the offerings are *sirih pinang* (a concoction of areca nut and betel leaf and its accompaniments), *pulut* (cooked sticky rice), roasted whole chicken, *ketupat* (rice cakes), *wajik* (sweet traditional delicacy made of sticky rice), *bertih* (popped rice), and other traditional Malay cakes (Mohamad Luthfi, 2016; Rahmah, 1979). Seven earthenware pitchers filled with water are also placed on the *para* along with the offerings (Figure 2.18).

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<sup>58</sup> The *Sembah Guru* performance which I witnessed in 2011, is an example.



Figure 2.18: Offerings and the masks at the altar before the performance. (Photograph taken by the author).

As a general rule, each night's performance begins with a Pre-Opening or *Buka Panggung* phase, which requires the leader and other elders to conduct a ritual to seek permission from the spirits of the ancestors to enable them to perform a show safely without any setbacks during the day within the premises of the *bangsal*, near the *tiang seri* (Abu Talib, 2010; *Mek Mulung*, 2003; Mohamad Luthfi, 2011; Mohd Ghazali, 1995; Siti Fatimah, 2009). Sometimes, this ritual is carried out by the leader himself behind closed doors. Various items are required for the ritual including candles, *bekas pinang* (a set of areca nut and betel leaves and its accompaniment), *duit pengeras* (a specific amount of

token payment for the medium or the person conducting the ritual)<sup>59</sup> and some oil. All these are placed in small individual plates which are then placed on a tray. Musical instruments are laid out in the *bangsal* whereby smoke from the burning incense is slowly swept over the instruments and around the performing space followed by the chanting of the *mantera* (Ahmad, 1976; Mohamad Luthfi, 2011; Mohd Ghazali, 1995; Ku Zam Zam, 1979; Rahmah, 1979). This is to ensure that good sounds come from the instruments and the space is safe and ready for the performance to take place. When this is done, the leader then invites the musicians, dancers, and actors to take their place in the performance space. It would not be unusual for the performers to take their time and leisurely walk over to the *bangsal*, get themselves warmed up individually, and then finally settle down to their positions. Thus, it is not unusual for the performance to finish past midnight.

Following the break after the theatre performance, which can last up to two hours, the musicians resume their positions and sing the trance song where they call upon their ancestors. By this time, the performance occurs in the early hours of the morning. After a few minutes, some of the performers and audience members go into a trance. (Refer to recordings of DVD Discs 6b and 6c in Section 2.7.1 which provide a glimpse of the beginnings of the trance section before I was asked to stop recording). Trance movements that I observed include performers and audience members trembling, climbing the *bangsal* roof and running around in the neighborhood (Figure 2.19).

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<sup>59</sup> Ahmad (1976) noted the amount as RM12.15.





Figure 2.19: A man in a trance who climbed up on the roof of the *bangsal* during the performance on 18 July 2011 in Wang Tepus. (Photograph taken by the author).

## 2.8 Conclusion

This chapter discusses the historical developments of *Mek Mulung* towards its current form in the Wang Tepus performance troupe. The scarcity of written historical evidence about the performance is supplemented by oral historical accounts to help position *Mek Mulung* within history and provide possible explanations to its inception. Written history can only explain a small amount of selected information from the past; however, oral history or, in Azhar's term, "people's history" provides underlying relevance to what is remembered in the present (2017, p. 13). A combination of written, visual, and oral accounts show that changes have occurred to *Mek Mulung* over the last several decades, most notably a large scale forgetting of storylines and associated

repertoire. This suggests the existence of elements, whether external or internal, that are influencing how the village community views and supports *Mek Mulung*. At the same time, certain core elements of *Mek Mulung* that remain intact provide the basis of the unique characteristics that form its identity in the wider performance economy of Malaysia. The performance form belonging to the cultural bearers themselves provides the central point of reference for understanding the developments that have impacted on *Mek Mulung* outside of Wang Tepus.

## Chapter 3

### The Reconstruction of the Modern/New *Mek Mulung*

#### 3.1 Introduction

*Mek Mulung* performances on the proscenium stage may appear to be a very recent phenomenon, considering that it has been traditionally carried out by *Mek Mulung* practitioners on specially-built *bangsas* located in specific village locations. This is especially the case within the performers' own village of Wang Tepus, or neighboring villages, when *bangsas* performances are put on to celebrate events such as weddings and other customary functions.

However, *Mek Mulung* performers in fact have quite a long history of adapting their art to proscenium stages, both indoors and outdoors, when creating performances outside of Wang Tepus and its surrounding villages. Conversations with *Mek Mulung* practitioners like Pak Saad and Pak Din<sup>60</sup> in Wang Tepus indicate this was the usual practice when they performed beyond the villages in their immediate vicinity. Throughout their careers as *Mek Mulung* performers, these informants have staged shows in other parts of Malaysia, including the eastern state of Pahang, the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, and even as far north as the Thai province of Satun. In other words, *Mek Mulung* performances on the proscenium stage are not new to village practitioners. However, these performers ensured that when they performed on the proscenium stage, they maintained as far as

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<sup>60</sup> Interview with Pak Din, 14 November 2016.

possible the performance concept and form as it would be performed according to the tradition of *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus.

In contrast to these versions, this chapter focuses on the evolution of *Mek Mulung* into its modern urban version when it was taken up instead by professional performers outside of its traditional base in Wang Tepus, and staged by such troupes in urban venues. I refer to this as the “concertized” version of *Mek Mulung*.<sup>61</sup> I will discuss changes in its performance form and the urban audiences’ understanding of the *Mek Mulung* tradition, and compare the quite different style of the village performance in Wang Tepus versus when it is performed by professionals on proscenium stages in Kuala Lumpur. I argue that two distinct styles of *Mek Mulung* can be identified, the contemporary urban *Mek Mulung* and the traditional village Wang Tepus performance style, which coexist simultaneously and are mutually dependent on each other; but that the urban concertized form has more hold on the national imagination than the village version.

### **3.2 The Beginnings of Proscenium Performances**

When *Mek Mulung* was displayed in colonial-era Singapore in 1922, it is not clear from the reports whether the performance was presented on stage or on a *bangsal* resembling the one that was traditionally used in Wang Tepus. The first recent attempt to bring *Mek Mulung* out from its Wang Tepus village context and present it in an urban location which was undertaken by the Kedah state JKKN in 1996 did place it on the proscenium stage. But at the national level, it was the PPAG, an independent performing arts group with their own professional performers that was instrumental in bringing *Mek Mulung* to urban audiences on a larger scale with the staging of their first concert

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<sup>61</sup> This urban modern version was first introduced by the PPAG in 2002.

performance in 2002. The PPAG held three more performances until 2011, after which the PPAG ceased to exist. However, thereafter, beginning in 2012, the Kedah state JKKN took over the staging of *Mek Mulung* concert performances and this has continued to the present with the latest performance being staged in August 2018.

In the process of transferring *Mek Mulung* from a village-based tradition to a concertized stage performance, many transformations in the performance have taken place (see Chapter 2). Of significance is the performers themselves. These traditionally comprised hereditary practitioners of the tradition in the village context; but in the concertized version they have been replaced by a cast of professional performers, performing on concert hall stages rather than the open-sided *bangsal*. This shift also led to transformations in the gender composition of the cast of both the village troupe and the concert hall version. When performing within their own village or nearby villages, the village troupe traditionally had a mixed-gender cast playing the appropriate roles according to gender. Since these performances were more like community celebrations, it was natural to expect participation from village folks, comprising both male and female village members.

However, during the 1980s when the village version of *Mek Mulung* was at its peak in popularity, requiring cast members to do a lot of travelling from village to village, there were changes in the cast membership. The exigencies of village work required that travelling troupes were predominantly male performers, with unmarried girls taking the women's parts or all-male casts with men taking women's parts. Women thus started to disappear from *Mek Mulung* performances. It was difficult for women to continue performing if they had to follow the troupe and leave their home and other family members behind with no one to manage domestic and agricultural activities.

This shift could also be a consequence of the Islamic revival movement around that period which brought about increased awareness of and debate over the roles of women in various social activities. Performing in public and travelling with the troupe would involve women having to be in constant company and interacting with the men. Thus, female *Mek Mulung* characters were played by the unmarried girls in the troupe or by the men who would dress up in female clothing with a scarf over their head. In such cases, the women members of the *Mek Mulung* troupe did have the choice to continue or stop performing, at least when they were young.

Thus, when it was first presented on the proscenium stage in Kedah two decades ago, the *Mek Mulung* concert performance comprised an all-male cast. In contrast, when the PPAG embarked on a grand presentation of a *Mek Mulung* concert performance, the large cast included male and female professional performers as well as drag performers. The male and female performers played roles consistent with their own gender. Drag performers were also hired to play and played female characters; however, these were performed in an exaggerated manner usually to create humor and incite excitement among the performers and the audience.

Newspaper accounts which documented village *Mek Mulung* performances on the proscenium stage in 1996 reveal that there were similarities between some aspects of performances by the traditional Wang Tepus troupe and the professional urban performers of today (Mohd Ibrahim, 1996; Zuhri, 1996). Auditorium-style venues require audiences to be seated and to passively watch performances taking place on a raised stage. Used to their traditional *bangsal* set-up, Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* performers had to adapt to this new and different performance environment, possibly with guidance from personnel of the Kedah state JKKN who sponsored their tours. They had to get used to performing

while facing the audience in front of them as opposed to facing a spiritual pillar, the *tiang seri*, in the traditional context, especially during the opening dances. The musicians had to position themselves behind the dancers and actors, or towards the side of the stage and facing the audience. However, at this stage, no extra props or backdrops were used.

Information gathered from interviews with Wang Tepus practitioner Abang Mat<sup>62</sup> reveal that during these earlier stagings, the opening section of the performance was not shortened and the number of performers remained the same as customary, thus predominantly maintaining what had been traditionally practised in Wang Tepus. As in the traditional village performances, the story component of the *Mek Mulung* could be performed partially complete, or presented as an incomplete version before commencing the closing song. Among the proscenium-stage venues where these performances have been staged are indoor auditoriums such as the *Taman Budaya* (Cultural Park) in Alor Setar, the state capital of Kedah, and the *Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur*–DBKL (Kuala Lumpur City Hall) in the nation’s capital. Outdoor performances also have included those which took place in the east coast state of Pahang and in Satun, Thailand.

Mohd Ibrahim (1996) noted that some aspects of concertization have been practiced by the *Mek Mulung* troupe of Wang Tepus for some time. Thus, the professional concertized version presented by the PPAG was not an entirely unfamiliar creation. But it is the PPAG version that has now become the “classic” model of a *Mek Mulung* concertized performance; and it is important to note that, in order to ensure that there would be a following from a wider audience unfamiliar with the village form, clear aesthetic changes to the traditional version were inevitable. Changes were made in consideration of various factors, resulting from collaborations between the traditional *Mek*

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<sup>62</sup> Personal communication with Abang Mat, 30 September 2017.

*Mulung* practitioners and their urban counterparts. Using the expertise of urban creative directors who had the advantage of knowing the background of the potential market for such performances, and access to funding and other resources such as time and manpower support, the PPAG was able to create what I consider as a “revivalist” *Mek Mulung* production which spoke to the quite different desires of their target urban market.

### **3.3 The Petronas Performing Arts Group (PPAG) and *Mek Mulung*’s Urban Popularity**

In the early 2000s, the PPAG travelled to Langkawi, an island off the coast of the state of Kedah, to carry out research on a local female legend known as *Mahsuri*.<sup>63</sup> The study’s aim was to provide the group with necessary background information for staging a musical in their resident performing hall, the *Dewan Filharmonik Petronas*–DFP (Petronas Philharmonic Hall), which is located in Kuala Lumpur’s iconic twin towers. As part of the trip to Langkawi, one of the PPAG directors contacted the Kedah state JKKN to request an opportunity to witness a dance drama called *Mek Mulung*. Arrangements were made for the PPAG entourage of performers and crew to visit Wang Tepus upon the completion of their tasks in Langkawi, in order to enable them to witness a *Mek Mulung* performance by the village troupe. Impressed with the presentation, and encouraged by the prospect of *Mek Mulung* as a possible stage performance subject, the PPAG team held discussions which finally led to their staging of a *Mek Mulung* performance at the DFP in 2002. This first *Mek Mulung* performance was a success and received many positive reviews. Three more successful performances followed before the group closed down in June 2012 due to cutbacks in funding by the parent company, the Petronas Group.

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<sup>63</sup> The details of this history come from personal communications in 2010 with former PPAG performers, Deeno and Juan.



In preparation for the performances, the PPAG sought the assistance of two of the main performers from Wang Tepus who served as consultants as well as resource personnel for teaching the PPAG performers. In consideration of the objective of presenting *Mek Mulung* performances on the proscenium stage to an urban and cosmopolitan audience, the PPAG introduced a version which was to become the model for *Mek Mulung* stage performances outside of Wang Tepus. In the debut performance in 2002, the main performance structure of the village *Mek Mulung* was incorporated to a large extent into the performance, but with some key modifications. The format introduced by the PPAG was soon adopted by other companies and used as the model for their own productions of *Mek Mulung* performances at various locations.

### **3.4 Staging of *Mek Mulung* by the PPAG**

Having witnessed the *Mek Mulung* performed by the Wang Tepus practitioners in their own traditional setting, the PPAG performers and crew had to consider what changes were necessary to adapt *Mek Mulung* for an urban audience. Decisions were based on the physical aspects of the chosen venue as well as the expectations of audiences who had become familiar with the PPAG's concert performances. (Refer footnote in section 1.4 in Chapter One, and section 3.4.1 this Chapter for background of PPAG).

A series of workshops were organized by the PPAG team in Kuala Lumpur over a period of several months to reconstruct the village version of *Mek Mulung* before the first performance was staged. Two senior village performers from Wang Tepus, Pak Saad and Pak Leh, were invited to conduct these workshops. During these workshop sessions, the PPAG team, especially the creative directors, inserted their values when offering their

inputs on the performance aspects, as well as to ensure that the whole production process was progressing according to their expected artistic targets.<sup>64</sup>

The performance that was established was thus refined as a result of exchanges of ideas and experiences from a variety of viewpoints, including those of senior traditional practitioners. In the initial stages, these syntheses came out of rehearsals. The selection of performers to play the lead roles was among the challenges faced by the PPAG. Although mostly professional performers who were actors and dancers, not all of the PPAG performers were able to sing and dance simultaneously. Most of the training in dancing, singing, and acting was conducted by Pak Leh. Through these training sessions, Pak Leh was able to identify from among the PPAG performers who would best able to play the main *Puteri* (Princess) character for the first *Mek Mulung* performance. Pak Saad's involvement during these workshop sessions in contrast was mainly to provide guidance to the musicians.

In a recorded interview by Zamzuriah with Pak Leh and Pak Saad, Pak Leh reveals how he made these selections. Pak Leh says, "... we have to see how he or she performs during practices ... They (the directors) asked me to choose from the many performers in the hall. They said, 'Pak Leh, take a look who should be the Queen (Princess), and who is worthy being the King. Whoever you choose, just point out to them'. I told them I did not know their names, so I just pointed out to Liza. 'She can be the queen. She looks graceful, the way she moves when she dances'".<sup>65</sup> Learning methods among the dancers of the PPAG with Pak Leh is discussed further in section 3.4.5 in this Chapter.

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<sup>64</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah in 2014.

<sup>65</sup> Pak Leh's own words during interview, "*Depa suruh Pak Leh pilih. Depa suruh Pak Leh pilih. Ramai dalam dewan tuh. 'Pak Leh', depa kata, 'Pak Leh pilih tengok yang nak jadi Permaisuri. Yang mana layak nak jadi Raja. Yang mana layak, tunjuk had tuh jer lah'. Habaq kita nama tak tau ... ha tuh tunjuk yang Liza ... dia jadi Permaisuri ... dia boleh. Tengok dia lembut sikit. Tengok ... cara gerak tari dia tuh.*"

Based on the exchanges of knowledge and ideas from various perspectives, certain guidelines of optimum staging were determined; for instance, in terms of the length of the performance. The PPAG was concerned that the audience might get tired if performances ran too long, which would also increase production cost—or worse lead to bad reviews. At the same time, the PPAG tended to base its current performances on its previous performances of other dance genres. In one recorded interview,<sup>66</sup> Pak Leh mentioned that performers who had performed a *Mak Yong* with a Kelantanese accent previously, struggled to get the right accent and pronunciation when performing *Mek Mulung* which required a knowledge of, or at least a familiarity with, the Kedah accent, because it is one of the key indicators of the performance. Apart from that, these performers might come from different home states and would not be familiar or able to reproduce the Kedah accent.

As well as considering the factors discussed above, in constructing the new modernized *Mek Mulung*, the PPAG had to make all possible efforts to please patrons who had willingly provided support for the project, and to meet expectations of paying audiences to be entertained by the performance. Working within an initial time line to produce a performance yet to find its audience, the PPAG team was faced with the excitement of attempting to introduce *Mek Mulung* to the world outside of Wang Tepus, and at the same time the possibility that the audience would not find it appealing, requiring necessary changes for audience acceptance in future performances. Over a span of ten years, four *Mek Mulung* performances were staged with various evolutions as the membership of the creative team changed. There were some alterations in the overall look of the performance, while some aspects of the first performances were maintained

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<sup>66</sup> Recorded interview from Zamzuriah's personal collection, 2009. Transcription by the author.

(Appendix H). Nonetheless, the form which made up the initial performance eventually set the stage for the new *Mek Mulung* that would be presented in urban settings, and thus established a new era in *Mek Mulung* performances.

#### **3.4.1 Promoting the Concertized *Mek Mulung***

In preparing *Mek Mulung* for presentation in the prestigious DFP in 2002, the overall look of the performance underwent a make-over, resulting in a new branding to cater to the prospective urban audience. PPAG's image is that of a modern, urban-based performing arts group which promotes Malaysian national performing arts. Hence, its performance concept for *Mek Mulung* raised expectations that it would be better than, if not at least on a par with, previous performances of other genres. The PPAG's repertoire of traditional performances already included *Randai* and *Mak Yong*, and towards the end of its existence, it even presented newly-created modern musicals: the last of these was titled *Inikah Kehidupan?* (Is This What Life Is?) and portrayed contemporary Malaysian life stories.

Conforming to the image and style projected by the PPAG, costume designs, stage sets, and promotion materials were highly stylized, spectacular, and grand in characteristic. As a privately-owned performing arts group, the PPAG had to ensure that its stage productions would be at least as good as, and preferably better than, the performing arts troupes of various government agencies such as the JKKM (National Department of Arts and Culture) and the Istana Budaya (Palace of Culture). Promotion of performances was done through many different media as well as circulated by word-of-mouth within the arts community. Press conferences were held and performance details

were communicated to a national audience through various local newspapers (Ellyna, 2002; Suhaimulua, 2002; Rosdan, 2007).

As shown in their promotion posters (Figure 3.1), the PPAG's beautiful and elaborate costumes and props, large cast, and the performance itself were designed to dazzle the audience. Pak Din<sup>67</sup> noted in an interview that the *Puteri's* costume alone had cost more than 20,000 Malaysian Ringgit (equivalent to approximately four thousand British Pounds). This lavish investment in the visual appearance of the performance was an important aspect which attracted people to the performance, and made it very different from village performances in Wang Tepus. In 2011, the PPAG staged *Mek Mulung* in the Kuala Lumpur City Hall Auditorium. By this time, news had spread that the PPAG would be disbanded. This 2011 performance created a sentimental and nostalgic feeling among performers and loyal audiences (Hizreen, 2012). In the same article, the director of the PPAG was quoted as saying, "... at the end of the day, PPAG had to move with the times" (p. 16). A related response from an audience who was also a former PPAG performer is reported in Chapter 5.

During this final season, an exhibition was incorporated which largely displayed costumes and instruments that had been used in numerous *Mek Mulung* performances in urban venues, but not those ordinarily used by the practitioners in Wang Tepus (Figure 3.2). In terms of costume use and presentation, the PPAG created a clear visual dissociation from what was presented in Wang Tepus. And it was the newly reconstructed, idealized, and imagined *Mek Mulung* created by the PPAG that was adopted by the Kedah state government as "traditional arts heritage", in promoting *Mek Mulung* in its gallery

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<sup>67</sup> Personal communication with Pak Din, 9 May 2012.



Figure 3.1: Flyers of PPAG's *Malim Bongsu* in 2007 (left) and *Cahaya Bulan* in 2011 (right) that were handed out to the public. Source: PPAG

in Alor Setar, along with exhibits from other performing arts of Kedah<sup>68</sup>. Instead of portraying the traditional *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus, the urban style was selected for display to the general public. This not only helped to solidify the preferred “refined” identity of *Mek Mulung* to the general public, but also underlined the rationale for repackaging the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*. This may be done in line with the JKKN at the federal as well as the state level in providing guidelines for staging traditional performances, such as the concertized *Mak Yong* costumes in their efforts to present *Mak*

<sup>68</sup> Other exhibits in the gallery include *Wayang Kulit Gedek*, *Mak Yong Kedah*, and other traditional games such as the *Congkak* and *Batu Seremban*. The author visited the gallery on 12 December 2016.



Figure 3.2: Costumes exhibited outside the performance hall during the PPAG's performance of *Cahaya Bulan* in 2011. (Photograph taken by author).

*Yong* as a Kelantanese identity. According to Suriyami (2009), *Mak Yong* gets government support and encouragement, both financial and otherwise, to make a global impact as a Kelantanese performing arts, especially having recognized by UNESCO as a tangible world heritage (p. 331). Such deliberate intervention and sponsorship, financial or otherwise, by the government at the federal, or state level, have not yet to be enjoyed by the *Mek Mulung* troupe of Kedah.

The display in Figure 3.3, which was exhibited by the Kedah state JKKN shows the *Puteri*'s costume as a glittering traditional gold-thread *baju Kedah*, a particular northern traditional costume, with various types of elaborate accessories. In contrast, in the Wang Tepus village context, the *Puteri* has always been described as wearing a long *baju kebaya*, a different traditional attire, with few or no accessories, just flowers in her



hair<sup>69</sup>. The *Inangs* or maids, however, may wear any appropriate female attire, such as the *baju kurung* or *baju Bandung*. In instances where male performers play female roles such as the maids, in the village version, a head scarf is added to complete the attire.



Figure 3.3: The mannequin exhibits the *Puteri*'s costume. The display cabinet on the left displays the accessories. (Photograph taken by the author).

Besides the array of costumes exhibited, there was little explanation of how the performance was staged in the village set-up. Despite the texts available in the exhibit mentioning Wang Tepus as the home base of the *Mek Mulung* tradition, there was no acknowledgement that these costumes on display did not represent those ordinarily used

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with Nurul Atikah (henceforth Nurul), Pak Saad's daughter on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2017.



by village performers. Similarly, with the *Mak Yong* village performers, as described by Suriyami (2009), who continue to wear their ordinary everyday clothes during performances. However, in comparison to *Mek Mulung* whose village costumes have not changed very much which reflect their current social condition, village costumes of *Mak Yong* have undergone several changes from 1920s until 2000s. These changes are quite obvious which in many cases are reflections of changes in social values and increased wealth among the village performers.

### **3.4.2 Urban Performance Structure and Stage**

The performance structure of the new urban *Mek Mulung* is now very different from the traditional village version. The urban version largely emphasizes the theatrical elements of the performance. In sharp contrast, the very elaborate opening section of the village *Mek Mulung* is very much the main or most important feature of the traditional performance, as it also is for many other Southeast Asian dance dramas, such as the *Mak Yong* and the *Menora*. In order to ensure that the concertized performance remains a secular presentation, any hint of spiritual or ritual-magic elements in the urban version are eliminated, or remain only as a surface component of the performance. The main focus of the new urban performance is the development of the theatrical component, with considerably less attention to the opening and closing sections of the performance.

The content and flow of the performance structure in the Wang Tepus version was the subject of Chapter Two, and a detailed description of the evolution of the village performance structure and style is found in the author's previous work (Nur Izzati, 2014). Three *Mek Mulung* performance structures have thus evolved in the past thirty years: firstly, the one that is currently practised by the Wang Tepus practitioners; secondly, an

imagined “ideal” structure in the minds of senior village performers that assumes the necessary talent, availability of female performers, and access to sufficient financial resources; and thirdly, what I have referred to as the concertized structure created by the PPAG. It should be noted that the PPAG could have produced the second, ideal *Mek Mulung* performance structure, had they wished to, considering that the PPAG had the resources to meet all of the ideal performance criteria. In the village version, men have historically performed women’s roles when female performers were unavailable. However, an analysis of the four presentations made by the PPAG during its lifespan reveals that despite having access to a pool of talented female performers within their troupe, certain female roles were actively given to male performers performing in drag. What is more, because of the huge success of the PPAG’s use of drag performers for female roles in their debut performance in 2002, drag performers became an attraction of the concertized style and have become a trademark ever since.

Many of the components of the ideal performance structure may not be viable anymore in the Wang Tepus context. Not all of these were given due consideration by the PPAG in their efforts towards the reconstruction of a *Mek Mulung* that they could claim as their own version. A major issue throughout my discussions with village performers has been the perceived lack of a capable female lead performer to play the *Puteri* whose main role is to perform in the opening section. Among the current members of the Wang Tepus troupe, there is no one who shows interest or has the capability to claim this significant role.<sup>70</sup> This means if the *Mek Mulung* is to be performed in Wang Tepus, the performance now excludes the *Puteri* character. The *Raja*, performed by Abang Mat in the *Raja*’s costume, performs the opening that is meant for the *Puteri*. He then calls for

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<sup>70</sup> Personal communication with Pak Saad’s son, Halim, and Abang Mat, September 2017.

his *Awang*. The *Puteri*'s role is mentioned within the performance but is not acted out. In other words, in the absence of a capable female lead, in the village, the *Puteri* role is currently not performed. Among the women in the village whom I had the opportunity to bring up this matter are the performers' spouses, Pak Saad's teenage daughter Nurul who is the only female dancer in the troupe, and Tok Chah who is the ritual specialist for *Sembah Guru* performances (Figure 3.4). Nurul admits that she performs with the group



Figure 3.4: The author with Tok Chah outside of her house in Wang Tepus.

voluntarily (Figure 3.5). Pak Din has a daughter, but she has never performed in *Mek Mulung*. In fact, it was Pak Din who said that fathers in the village do not encourage their



Figure 3.5: The author with Nurul in her house in Wang Tepus.

daughters to be involved in *Mek Mulung*.<sup>71</sup> During another interview with Pak Din, both his wife and son who were also present during the interview gave the impression that Pak Din was reluctant to teach his son to play the *serunai*.<sup>72</sup> I conclude from these conversations that Pak Din does not encourage his family to become involved in *Mek Mulung* in general.

In the case of the PPAG troupe, there were enough female performers in the PPAG troupe to play the female lead role of the *Puteri* and the maids. However, the group still

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Pak Din on 14 November 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Pak Din in November 2016 (in presence of wife and son).

opted to include female impersonators in the cast, ostensibly to reflect the *kampung*, or village, style. Ideally, performers would be identified as to who are capable of playing the specific roles as close possible to the ideal from among the available talent at hand. Instead, the creative team of the PPAG achieved a successful performance structure which met their own ideals by ignoring the Wang Tepus villagers' ideal structure, and deriving their authority to introduce drag characters from the practical accommodations the village troupe had had to make in the past to overcome a lack of women performers.

The opening section of the PPAG presentation likewise shows that it has been shortened drastically by omitting several songs, including the Bertabik. This can be ascertained by comparing the opening section in the performance structure of *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus as described in the previous chapter, with the analyses of the four *Mek Mulung* performances staged by the PPAG between 2002 and 2011 (Nur Izzati, 2014). The four-dance sequence of the opening section was performed in their complete form during the first ever PPAG show in 2002; but during the three subsequent performances, one dance from the sequence was omitted. The Makan Pinang song was only present in the last *Mek Mulung* performance of *Cahaya Bulan* in 2011. By this point, the overall length of the performance had been dramatically shortened from the village version,<sup>73</sup> while the opening cast was increased to about threefold of that expected in village performances.

The order in which the characters are introduced following the opening section shows consistency in sequence between the Wang Tepus version and the PPAG version, in which the *Puteri* makes the first appearance. The only exception occurred during the *Dewa Muda* performance in 2010 whereby, after the opening section, the *Puteri* retreats

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<sup>73</sup> From approximately 4 hours to about 1 1/2 hours including intermission.

to allow the *Raja* to introduce himself first. According to Abang Mat,<sup>74</sup> the ideal structure is to follow the established rule in which the *Puteri* introduces herself first, because whoever does the opening part should have the honour of introducing himself/herself first. During the Wang Tepus performance in 2011, the *Raja* appeared first to perform the opening sequence. However, the Wang Tepus audience was familiar with and accepted the *Raja*'s appearance in the opening sequence as he was also playing the role of the *Puteri*, even though he was not in a performance attire representing the *Puteri*. This served as a solution to practical issues in the village performance whereby there is a need for performers to make minimal wardrobe changes during performances. It would be a rather odd situation if the *Raja* assumed his role as the *Raja* to sing the opening song when the song text did not correspond with his role as the *Raja*, but that of the *Puteri*.

The Pecah Lakon part of the structure marks the beginning of the plot of the theatrical component, the point at which the story is formally narrated to the audience. With the exception of the PPAG's earliest performance in 2002, this section of the performance was most often done by the *Raja*. From the perspective of an ideal *Mek Mulung* performance, it should be done by the *Puteri*, not the *Raja*. In the PPAG's 2002 performance of *Cahaya Bulan*, the entire Pecah Lakon section was omitted.

Upon the completion of the plot's narration, the closing song, Kecil Milik, was sung in all the *Mek Mulung* performances by the PPAG. This was the only section where there was consistent agreement among all the four PPAG's performances. There were points of structural conformity between the PPAG's performance structure and the ideal Wang Tepus performance structure, but the details were often modified. For example, the Gerak Timpuh was performed in all the four PPAG performances, even though an

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<sup>74</sup> Personal communication with Abang Mat, 30 September 2017.

abridged version was utilized so as to avoid taking the usual half hour to complete this section. Musically, the producers considered the multi-strophic form and the low frequency of intervallic change in melody to be too boring for a passive audience's attention span. Thus, in spite of general resemblances between the four performances, they were not identical to each other in terms of structure. However, these variations were not noticed by the general audience, unfamiliar with the village form, who came to watch the performances.

The *Mek Mulung* performance structure created by the PPAG maintained a brief opening section. The theatrical aspect of the performance was of great importance to the performance such that dramatic supporting songs such as the Mengulit or Mengulik and Masuk ke Taman were heard more often than the others. These songs were therefore often used to make comparisons when being played by the village *Mek Mulung* performers of Wang Tepus. Due to time constraints, the PPAG performance could not incorporate other aspects associated with the ideal structure. These included things like staging the performances for several consecutive nights to enable the story to develop, as well as to test the skills of the *Awangs* to impress the audience with impromptu jokes and improvisations, and to respond in greater length to the audience. The story itself consists of several main plots and moving from one plot to another is highly improvised. To give an example on how these improvisations are carried out, for instance in the performance of *Cahaya Bulan*, the *Raja* sends his *Awang* to see *Tok Wak*, the old sage, to find out why the *Puteri* has had strange dreams. On one night's performance *Awang* crosses a river to get to *Tok Wak*'s house. On another night's performance, *Awang* goes through a thick forest where he meets a wandering traveller whereby the conversations between them

during the journey to *Tok Wak*'s house is improvised. There is no limit in terms of the length of these improvisations.

### **3.4.3 Creating the Storyline and Developing the Script**

The first *Mek Mulung* performance to be staged by the PPAG was *Cahaya Bulan*, which is one of the most common *Mek Mulung* plots performed in the village setting. It has a complex storyline consisting of many characters. Along with a large cast of performers, most of the scenes were able to be acted out and provided the audiences with opportunities to appreciate the visual spectacle of characters such as the ogres and the ogres' clown servants as they acted out their roles. *Mek Mulung* performances in the village, in contrast, usually consist of only a few performers, and it is not unusual for some of the scenes not acted out but instead narrated.

In the concertized version, when a *Mek Mulung* performance is planned, for example, the story of *Cahaya Bulan*, a written script is prepared. Whereas in the village version, the story is orally passed down and performed according to the stock stories. For a stage presentation, dialogues which take the form of a formal script would integrate important elements of the performance such as mandatory phrases, songs, and comedy. The comedy elements may consist of references to urban issues that are current and relatable to the audience. In the PPAG performance, Pak Leh was largely instrumental in providing the oral stories which were then transformed into written story scripts. These scripts were memorized by the selected performers and rehearsed, thus minimizing improvisations during the performance.

The theatrical aspects of the *Mek Mulung* performance provide the main focus in the staged urban presentation. Hence, the story's plot and completing it within the



timeframe of the performance are major concerns; whereas in the village, incomplete plots are not uncommon. To the performers in Wang Tepus, the long opening and the closing sections constitute a complete performance. Concertized *Mek Mulung* performances, on the other hand, can never be presented in an incomplete form. To enable the plot to be finished within a certain duration, and to emphasize the theatrical aspects of the performance, the length of the ritually crucial opening section had to be sacrificed. The creative directors' stated rationale was that the opening section was repetitive and dry. They reduced the duration of the songs that were sung in strophic and responsorial style in the opening section from the standard forty minutes to about fifteen minutes. According to Zamzuriah, this was to allow enough time to complete the story plot within a standard modern play length.

In the Wang Tepus village version, completing the story is not a significant aspect of the performance. Less attention is placed on the part of performers to follow a story line through until its end in the performance. On occasions when performances go on for several nights, the story would continue throughout the duration. But what really marked out the urban *Mek Mulung* from the village version visually was the PPAG's emphasis on including drag performers for female roles.

#### **3.4.4 Female Impersonators as Drag Spectacle in *Mek Mulung***

Male stage performers acting female roles are not unusual sights in Southeast Asia; in the Malay peninsula such performances go back at least to the 1800s (Peletz, 2009). In the courts of the states of Johor and Kelantan, male employees were given domestic roles traditionally considered "female" in the Malay world, such as ensuring clothing and food

were in order<sup>75</sup>. In other parts of Southeast Asia, male-to-female transgenders earned high status in society as they are usually associated with having knowledge of spiritual matters, or are shamans that the community would seek out for their help in times of need<sup>76</sup>. In Kelantan, for example, special villages are allocated to these groups of transgender court helpers; they are traditionally not considered outcasts or shunned by the public.

Recordings and photographs of village *Mek Mulung* performances as early as 1975 until the early 1980s show male performers dressed in female clothing and dancing in the performances alongside male and female performers playing same-gendered roles. Recordings from several sources<sup>77</sup> demonstrate they do not have spoken roles and mostly appear during the opening section of the *Mek Mulung* performance. From interviews<sup>78</sup>, these male substitutes for female roles were generally used when there were not enough female performers, rather than as an aesthetic choice. The informants mentioned that there were no restrictions on females performing on stage. One interviewee mentioned that as a trickle-down effect from the Iranian Islamic revolution of the 1970s, fathers discouraged their daughters from performing in public. The number of female performers declined in Wang Tepus and its surroundings from that time, and it was only very recently that the younger daughter of Pak Saad decided to perform with the troupe.<sup>79</sup>

Interviews with these older villagers<sup>80</sup> suggest the Wang Tepus performance also evolved over time in relation to various changes that have taken place historically,

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<sup>75</sup> These court maids were called *sida-sida*, loosely translated as eunuchs (Peletz, 2009). These *sida-sidas* were non-surgical, unlike eunuchs of the Moghul palaces or the Chinese courts. They performatively behaved as females at that time and sometimes would have female-like reactions to men. *Sida-sidas* worked alongside female maids.

<sup>76</sup> The Bugis *bissu* (Graham, 2004; Peletz, 2009) and the *Nat Kadaw* of Burma (Ho, 2009; Peletz, 2009) were among the transgendered “spiritual specialists” within Southeast Asia.

<sup>77</sup> Ethnographic Video Instruction & Analysis Digital Archive, 1982; Jabatan Muzium dan Antikuiti, 2002; Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara, 2005.

<sup>78</sup> Recorded interview from Zamzuriah’s personal collection, 2009. Transcription by the author.

<sup>79</sup> Nurul, Pak Saad’s youngest daughter, debut *Mek Mulung* performance was in 2011 when she was 10 years old. The author has personal recordings of performances 15-18 July 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Personal communication with Pak Awie, 30 September 2017.

particularly in terms of the resources available to them, the moral and political climate, and the local talent that could be tapped. It has now come to a point whereby the troupe has to make do with whatever is available to ensure that the tradition continues. Although villagers still aspire to produce the best *Mek Mulung* performance each time, they believe current productions do not achieve the ideal described by their forefathers. An ideal *Mek Mulung* performance would include female performers playing the female roles, instead of resorting to men playing female roles. (Refer discussion in section 3.4.2 of this Chapter). In contrast, in many other folk and village performances in Southeast Asia, such as the *Mak Yong* in Kelantan (Peletz, 2009), the *Hadrah* in Kedah and Perlis (Razak, 1959), and *Randai Bujang Gadih* in Sumatera (Pauka, 1998), male performers in female roles have been an essential part of the tradition. In these contexts, women performing on stage within the village community was almost unheard of before the modern era. Female performers seem to have become incorporated into these performances later, eventually becoming a major attraction during the late colonial-era development of *Bangsawan*, a modern stage play based on Parsi theatre and performed in Malay (Cohen, 2002; van der Putten, 2014) and *Ronggeng*, a Malaysian form of social dance (Tan, 2005).

During the 1990s, reports of *Mek Mulung* performances being presented on the proscenium stage began to appear as articles in local and national newspapers (Mohd Ibrahim, 1996; Zuhri, 1996). In this early documentation, performers were described as mostly, if not all, elderly and male villagers, and the female roles were taken by male performers wearing female clothing and wigs<sup>81</sup>. When performing in the village, male performers wore headscarves instead of wigs. These female roles played by men could be

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<sup>81</sup> In Azman's (1997) academic exercise, Abang Mat explained that Wang Tepus male performers playing female characters usually donned scarves when performing. The female characters wearing wigs in the 1996 performance in Taman Budaya, which Mohd Ibrahim (1996) and Zuhri (1996) reported, were not Wang Tepus performers but guest performers appearing on this show.

performed in a wide range of ways, from extremely exaggerated effeminate mannerisms to the simple donning of traditional female attire to indicate a female character.

The post-PPAG scene of urban reconstructed *Mek Mulung* has widely incorporated female impersonators into casts as an aesthetic choice, rather than out of exigency. These performers adopt drag personas, and they appear to becoming the main attraction in these performances which, if producers and directors are not cautious, may turn into drag comedies. These male drag performers create a strong presence in the performance by exaggerating their roles as males in female clothing. The comedic elements in the urban *Mek Mulung* are now largely contributed by these characters, who usually play the *Inang* roles, along with vibrant scripted sections by smaller characters. This is in sharp contrast to the village performance, in which comedy is usually reserved for those playing the role of *Awang*, the red-masked clown servants. It is the *Inangs*, transformed into comic characters dependent on ready-made scripts, who grab the urban audiences' attention; but audiences of the village *Mek Mulung* look forward instead to the ability of the *Awang* to create and improvise jokes and comedic acts.

Among the traditional theatrical genres that have been staged for the urban audience, *Mek Mulung* is one of few that have included female impersonators in the concertized cast. It appears that audience response has been positive, or rather, few criticisms have been publicly expressed. It is an interesting topic for discussion when taking into consideration the fact that cross-dressing actors are performing publicly on stage, when such acts can lead to performers facing prosecution for indecent behaviour in Malaysia, especially if they involve Muslim performers (Goh, 2012). The involvement of female impersonators can be seen as adding a component of humor to the performance whose target audience is the Malay Muslim majority. This positive assessment hopefully

will continue in spite of the negative perception and condemnation by pro-Islamist groups towards men performing as females in public events.

Peletz (2009) quotes Douglas Raybeck, who observed that Malays of the east coast in the 1960s, especially those residing in Kelantan, “regard[ed] homosexuality as peculiar, different, and even somewhat humorous, but they ... [did not view it as an illness or as a serious sin]” (1986; 65, emphasis added by Peletz). Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s situation comedies on television (TV sitcoms), such as *Jangan Ketawa*, portrayed drag actors in mainstream television programs. There was no threat then of complaints from the public for actions to be taken by the Censorship Board nor from the Islamic Religious Department or other Islamic religious bodies.

Given the ideal *Mek Mulung* performance should comprise male and female performers playing same-gender roles, however, when cross-dressing and gender-bending characters became part and parcel of the *Mek Mulung* stage performance, there is a question as to how controversial that was, and whether/at what point it might be considered as having crossed the line of acceptance.<sup>82</sup> Genres like the *Hadrah* used to include male crossdressers as performers explicitly because it was considered indecent for women to perform in public, especially in the company of men (Ahmad Hakimi & Zahir, 2006; Razak, 1959). Alternatively, *Hadrah* performances resorted to involving only female dancers. There were even troupes which completely changed their music to exclude the dance component which resulted in their losing their original identity, no longer attracting an audience following, and thus barely surviving. *Hadrah* is no longer a popular tradition. Another once-popular tradition, *Nogey*, has completely disappeared and there are no signs indicating any revival of any sort. My consultations with various

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<sup>82</sup> Shanon Shah (2015) in his PhD thesis mentioned the juggling of this grey area regarding *Syariah* or Islamic enforcement officers targeting drag performances at traditional Malay weddings in small towns (pp. 197-199).

traditional Malaysian music experts have not come up with any possible explanations for the *Nogey*'s disappearance or even when it began to show signs of decline.

PPAG informants believe that the decision to include male drag performers in their *Mek Mulung* performances was done with the consent of the Wang Tepus traditional performers, and it certainly contributed to a large extent to the urban *Mek Mulung*'s rise in popularity. In a recorded interview<sup>83</sup>, Pak Leh did mention that participation of effeminate males (termed as *pondan*) were permissible and did not seem to cause any problems in a *Mek Mulung* performance. My view about this is that the PPAG has much to gain from the popularity of the drag performers in the concertized *Mek Mulung*; rather than the *Mek Mulung* performers merely encouraging their active participation. Making *Mek Mulung* humorous in this way appears to have increased acceptance and appreciation among urban consumer-audiences rather than facing the fate of *Hadrah* performances, which through increasing censorship has become wholly instrumental in form, or available only in the form of song fragments. Drag spectacle appears to be the major factor in *Mek Mulung*'s popularity and success in gaining a large audience following. Packaged with a spectacular presentation based on the reconstructed form, the audience is able to feel they are watching a traditional theatre performance, which they are largely unaware has been reconstructed to suit their urban gaze.

The PPAG was the earliest group to use male drag performers in its *Mek Mulung* shows; most others have followed this path. Many male drag performers appearing in traditional stage presentations have become celebrities who are sought after by the various *Mek Mulung* production companies. One male-to-female performer associated with the Universiti Malaya production has a Facebook page in the name of his *Mek Mulung*

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<sup>83</sup> Recorded interview from Zamzuriah's personal collection, 2009. Transcription by the author.

character persona, *Inang Hitam*, whom he played in a performance in December 2016. *Inang Hitam*'s page has now been replaced by the performer's successful commercial cosmetic line, Mak Inang Beauty (see Chapter Six).

Significant changes in *Mek Mulung* urban performances have resulted from the incorporation of male drag roles since the concertized form was first created by the PPAG in its debut performance. The PPAG has turned the ordinary village *Mek Mulung* tradition into a spectacular performance through the use of elaborate sets and costumes, but I would argue the involvement of male drag performers is the main factor by which *Mek Mulung* remains popular on the urban stage. In a workshop organized by the Kedah state JKKN, it was discussed how these drag performances could raise sensitive issues and that they should be dealt with care, noting that it was important for the authorities to know drag is carried out for performance purposes, but does not suggest a lifestyle. This would ensure that the authorities do not see *Mek Mulung* performances as a threat to the morals of the society. It is important to note that although punishable by law, police officers perceive drag performances in the context of theatre as a low priority concern which does not pose a threat to the security and safety of the community (Teh, 2002).

#### **3.4.5 Choreographing the Dances**

Movements within particular dance routines when performed in the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* often show inconsistencies from one performer to another. In normal circumstances, the lead character begins a dance sequence which is then followed by the rest of the dancers. The dancers normally accommodate themselves to the style of the lead dancer to enable a successful dance performance staged in the *bangsal*. For the professional performers of the PPAG, however, inconsistencies of dance movements

between the performers and dancers were eliminated during rehearsal sessions. Cameras were set up to record these training sessions so that performers and dancers could check the uniformity of their dance movements and make the necessary adjustments to conform with a consistent style. Former PPAG dancers<sup>84</sup> acknowledge that there was originally a lot of variance in dance gestures. Beginning with consultations with Pak Leh, dancers went through a process of selecting dance movements they could experiment with before deciding on a single final version. To maintain uniformity, dancers usually associated certain dance movements with a particular piece. Following this experimentation, and with the approval from Pak Leh, the dancers and the instructor then selected a few movement motifs to be fixed to the piece.

Creating consistency of dance movements in specific pieces meant that the dances were also easily reproduced and easy to introduce to newer PPAG members. Movement variants were not used in the same piece, but newer dance movements might replace already known and established movements as a result of a new choreographer's "embellishment" to the new season's performance. As the seasons progressed, the dance movements became more embellished with certain dance movements replacing the versions established previously, without referencing the styles established through consultations with Pak Leh. According to Zamzuriah<sup>85</sup>, the styles changed progressively with inputs from the dance creative director who added more intricacies into the simple moves of the original *Mek Mulung*. It was perceived that the more complex movements would be more pleasing to the audience. An example of the changes can be seen in the

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<sup>84</sup> Personal communication in 2010 with Juan and Deeno, former male PPAG dancers.

<sup>85</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah, 17 September 2017.



PPAG four-dance suite from the first staging of *Mek Mulung Cahaya Bulan* in 2002<sup>86</sup> (babah sg blh, 2010) and the *Mek Mulung Malim Bongsu* in 2007 (ayu syuhara, 2012a).<sup>87</sup>

### 3.4.6 The Learning Process: PPAG Style

Similarities in the learning process can be observed between the PPAG performers and the village approach used by Abang Mat in training his apprentice Halim, who is Pak Saad's son. As an oral tradition, the learning process in *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus involves passing down through rote learning. The PPAG performers, on the other hand, were required to possess some type of formal dance training before they could audition and become a part of the PPAG performance troupe. Most have at least completed high school and developed their own way of notating on top of the script given during training. For Pak Leh, notation is not a part of the village learning process during his time. But Halim has started to use a form of personal notation by writing the song text in his notebook and recording music on his mobile phone.

Technological advances have enabled the use of video recordings by the PPAG to identify details in Pak Leh's dance routine as he was conducting the teaching process. As professional dancers, the PPAG performers have had experience in previous dance training as well as performing other traditional theatre productions such as *Mak Yong* and

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<sup>86</sup>A recording of the *Mek Mulung Cahaya Bulan* is available through YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xqHa7zocO8> (accessed on 15 April 2019). The four-dance suite starts at 6:18 but only plays the first dance, the Puteri Mabuk (intoxicated princess) and part of Anak Menora (Descendant of Menora). By the end of the YouTube clip, the author had put in the next video but it does not start at the end of the last clip.

<sup>87</sup> A recording of *Mek Mulung Malim Bongsu* is available through YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuR14Xlh7go> (accessed on 7 April 2019). Here, the four-dance suite starts at 4:07 and ends at 8:49. At 8:10, the last piece in the dance suite, the Sedayung (Sauntering) in this PPAG performance replaced the actual movements in Wang Tepus described by Zamzuriyah. A closer resemblance of the movement of Sedayung can be seen in ASWARA 2012 (Zuwandi, 2012) performance available through YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryW0TmUjLoE&t=131s> (accessed on 15 April 2019) from 15:06 – 16:18. A 1982 recording via Ethnographic Video for Instruction and Analysis Digital Archive (Matusky, n.d.) confirms this <https://media.eviada.org/eviadab/displaysegment.html?id=19-S0608&videoPlayer=SWF> (accessed on 15 April 2019) at 00:34:20. Access to this content must be applied through the providers.

*Randai*. These past experiences might influence their subsequent training process which could influence their dance movements in their *Mek Mulung* performances. Creating the dances also required the performers to decide on a uniform set choreography. By limiting or removing variations in the combination of hand and leg movements, dance variations could be eliminated.

The PPAG performers were constrained to learn and be ready to perform according to a schedule that was pre-determined by the directors, especially through their experience in the first two performances. Although there is no formal apprenticeship for performers of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*, they have the advantage of growing up in the tradition and are thus instinctively accustomed to the nuances of the performance. During her fieldwork in Wang Tepus, Zamzuria<sup>88</sup> noted that some of the movements can be adopted as personal preference and some dances may favor certain movements within a song which can be different from another.

The learning process among the PPAG members as well as those in Wang Tepus evolved with advances in technology. For example, PPAG has recorded, and kept in its archive, songs made by Pak Leh for documentation purposes. The value of this archive as future reference becomes increasingly apparent especially to *Mek Mulung* researchers. During my discussions of these recordings with Zamzuria,<sup>89</sup> one of the issues that came up was that there are songs that Pak Leh knew which did not get passed down to Abang Mat, for example, the song Masuk ke Dalam Taman. When this was brought up to Abang Mat, he admitted not knowing how to sing the song nor aware of the PPAG recordings. There should be efforts to ensure that materials on *Mek Mulung* kept in PPAG's archive

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<sup>88</sup> Zamzuria, during a recording of a demonstration on 11 October 2017.

<sup>89</sup> PPAG recordings in Zamzuria's personal collection, 2009.

made accessible as these are important references to the *Mek Mulung* tradition, not only for researchers and performance makers, but also to the performers themselves.

### **3.4.7 Urban Reconstruction Summary**

The structure and timeframe of the PPAG performance led to a number of minor variations in presenting their version of the *Mek Mulung*. The PPAG's development of an established structure and style was the result of mediations between the *Mek Mulung* performers of Wang Tepus and consideration of the tastes of the target audience. Although some members of the Wang Tepus troupe were consulted in establishing the design of the PPAG *Mek Mulung*, the requirement to adhere to the needs of urban stakeholders seem to have taken precedence.

The PPAG's reconstructed model created interest among other troupes, who used it as the model for their *Mek Mulung* productions, but this time without consulting the practitioners of Wang Tepus, thus moving *Mek Mulung* further from the village practice. By accepting the PPAG's model, there is very little effort on the part of other performance makers to redevelop the design of the PPAG's urban format to fit other locales with different audience characteristics. To these groups of performance makers, the characteristic identifiers of today's *Mek Mulung* have already been engraved in the minds of the audience, which decides their own understanding of what *Mek Mulung* is as well as defining how other people understand it. With the endorsement of the concertized version by established organizations such as the JKKN, this new identity for *Mek Mulung* has been assumed as the standard, approved format which is expected to be disseminated and promoted through all performances as well as through things like exhibitions in galleries. In gaining popularity and acceptance from various audiences for their own version of the

traditional *Mek Mulung* stage performance, the PPAG's urban popular form continues to develop on its own terms, distancing it further from the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* practitioners.

A recent experience reported by an academic staff at a private university in Kuala Lumpur might be a cause for concern in terms of the direction taken by the performers of Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*<sup>90</sup>. As part of a study on Kedah arts, this researcher made contact with a village *Mek Mulung* practitioner who agreed to be interviewed. In response to her request for a short demonstration of the *Mek Mulung*, the informant declined and instead suggested that the researcher contacted the Kedah state JKKN for assistance in viewing a demonstration of *Mek Mulung*. It would appear that the informant recognized and deferred to the “concertized” form promoted by the JKKN as the “standard” *Mek Mulung* that the researcher should be watching and studying.

The shift of importance of staging *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus from its ritualistic functions means that *Mek Mulung* in its previous context will not be able to survive into the next century without some kind of intervention to prove its worth in the village environment. In view of the growing popularity of *Mek Mulung* in its concertized format, such intervention could root the future direction of the form more securely in its origins. Through mutual interrelationships, both the village tradition and the concertized urban *Mek Mulung* have so far been able to co-exist in their own particular spheres, though only the urban form can be said to have prospered. In fact, co-existence and more equal mutual dependence could elevate the status of the original (Beaman, 2018; Howard, 2014), but it is perhaps too late for the village form. Further discussions on future recommendations are elaborated in Chapter Seven. The current reality is that there is lack of interest among

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<sup>90</sup> Personal communication with a staff of SUNWAY University, 24 December 2017.

the elder practitioners to perform or teach the village tradition to the younger generation. At the same time, the younger generations are seeking better life prospects by searching for career opportunities outside the village.

It seems likely the urban *Mek Mulung* will continue to develop as the “standard” form in wider urban venues, becoming institutionalized in educational settings and attracting interest among the younger generations, perhaps establishing itself on a global platform through performances outside Malaysia. The evolution of the *Mek Mulung* as a concertized performance will maintain its relevance to different audiences, whatever its relationship with the Wang Tepus tradition.

### **3.5 Zamzuriah: Creating the Ideal Concertized *Mek Mulung***

Beginning in 2009, the National Academy of Arts and Culture (ASWARA) made the decision to include *Mek Mulung* as a compulsory subject within the core curriculum for the degree program. To develop the new curriculum, Zamzuriah, a teaching staff in the Dance Department was sent by ASWARA to Wang Tepus to get more insight about the *Mek Mulung* tradition to be shared with the students. Zamzuriah was a former student majoring in dance in the Diploma program of ASWARA, which was then known as the National Arts Academy (*Akademi Seni Kebangsaan*–ASK). She then continued her studies for a Bachelor’s degree at the Universiti Malaya majoring in theatre. In 2006, she was the recipient of the National Arts Award (New Talent Award category) and is a prominent stage performer in the performing arts scene in Kuala Lumpur. Zamzuriah is a renowned artist in her own right and given her qualifications, as well as being a former student at ASWARA, was the most appropriate person to carry out the task.

Hailing from Pengkalan Chepa, in the state of Kelantan, Zamzuriah has had plenty of exposure to the Kelantanese arts. However, she had only learnt them herself when studying for her Diploma in ASWARA. After graduating from Universiti Malaya, she became an advocate for Kelantanese performing arts while at the same time being actively involved in performing traditional and hybrid or experimental works. Zamzuriah's involvement in Kelantanese performing arts deepened when she married her colleague at ASWARA who comes from a lineage of Kelantanese performing arts practitioners, and has established himself as a successful *Wayang Kulit* practitioner. Both Zamzuriah and her husband, along with their four young children, are active performers in the traditional performing arts scene, particularly those of Kelantan origin.

Zamzuriah, like Marie-Andree Coulliard,<sup>91</sup> had stayed with the late Pak Leh during the course of her research. Zamzuriah travelled between Kuala Lumpur and Wang Tepus, a distance of about 500 kilometers, during a period of three years from 2009, each time staying for up to three weeks to conduct interviews and document the songs and stories that the troupe members could recall.<sup>92</sup> During this period of her research, most of her interviews were carried out with Pak Saad, Pak Leh and Abang Mat. These interviews were mostly done inside their respective homes and sometimes near the *bangsal* area where they staged their performances. Because of the length of time she spent with Pak Leh, they developed a very close bond which is much known by the other members of the *Mek Mulung* troupe of Wang Tepus.

By this point in time, Pak Leh and Pak Saad had already been advisors for the PPAG performers and had already staged two concertized performances of their own. During her interviews with them, Zamzuriah compared and discussed with them their

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<sup>91</sup> Personal communication via e-mail with Marie-Andree Coulliard, 8 January 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah, 2017.

views of the PPAG's *Mek Mulung* performances. Among the points raised during these discussions was that Pak Leh felt that the PPAG's performance tempo was at a faster pace than was normal in the village troupe, and that the performers were noticeably awkward using the Kedah dialect. From these interviews, it was apparent that these elder practitioners of Wang Tepus acknowledged the differences between the village and the PPAG performance forms, but were not especially concerned about them. As advisors and teachers of the PPAG performers, they felt partly responsible for these performance changes.

Zamzuriah also mentioned that there were occasions when Pak Leh had confessed to her privately that he would have preferred some aspects of the performance to be done differently. However, the modified forms were allowed to go on due to time constraints and the limited training by the performers. Both Pak Leh and Pak Saad were paid well for their services, and perhaps did not want to show offense over what could have been regarded as minor issues. Nonetheless, that they raised these issues at all with Zamzuriah during her fieldwork shows they were of some concern to them.

### **3.5.1 Developing *Mek Mulung* for ASWARA**

Although partly influenced by the performance style of the PPAG, Zamzuriah knew that she was able to make changes whenever necessary to reflect a *Mek Mulung* that would adhere more closely to the Wang Tepus performance, but at the same time be appropriate for staging in an urban reconstructed context. Crucially, besides the specific curriculum which the students have to follow in terms of academic content, both Pak Leh and Pak Saad would be present during the classes to enable students to personally interact with these holders of the tradition.

Zamzuriah used the structure of the PPAG as a guideline, but made changes to the flow of the performance to come closer to the village form. Rituals normally associated with performances of *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus were avoided during the classroom lessons on campus. Nonetheless, Pak Saad mentioned that each time before leaving for Kuala Lumpur for the teaching sessions, he had sought “permission” to conduct the performances so as to ensure the safety of the students. Permission in this context refers to paying homage to the spirits guarding the performance and the performers. It can be done remotely from the performance space, usually by Pak Saad, involving some incantations and betel nut. Zamzuriah made sure that all four dances, which the PPAG had shortened or omitted, were performed according to the way Pak Leh had taught her. The Bertabik section, which was a salutation to the spirits, was not performed. Nonetheless, when staged at ASWARA, all the song texts would start with the beginning-most part of the Gerak Timpuh, “*Eeee setelah sudah amboi di saya la eee bertabik*”, which gives the message that the Bertabik took place prior to that. Zamzuriah pointed out the importance of mentioning that Bertabik had taken place even though in reality it was not performed. The PPAG model in contrast did not start the Gerak Timpuh song text from the beginning, but rather further down the text with, “*Eee tokleh ralek amboi di didagang la eee dok bilang*”. (Refer to Appendix E for song texts and translations).

Zamzuriah also stressed the point that it is very important not to miss the Pecah Lakon/Tangkap Lakon part of the performance, which either the *Raja* or the *Puteri* had performed throughout the years *Mek Mulung* was staged. It was mentioned in the previous chapter that it has always been expected for the *Puteri* to perform this when she appears at the beginning of the performance. From recent discussions with Zamzuriah, it was proposed that from now on she prefers to have the *Puteri* doing the Pecah Lakon. Apart



from being assured by Zamzuriah and the curriculum that they would learn to perform the *Mek Mulung* that most closely resembled the Wang Tepus tradition, the students had sufficient access to and thus would get first-hand guidance from the Wang Tepus performers. Pak Din, who took over following Pak Leh's passing, always took charge of the musicians that consequently enabled the students to benefit more from them in terms of the musical aspects; rather than the dance or the theatre aspects of the performance which they could benefit from Zamzuriah's expertise.

Although the concertized form was initially designed by the PPAG as an urban reconstruction of the *Mek Mulung*, Zamzuriah was able to address key issues which resulted from the drastic changes made by the PPAG that had taken the performance structure far from the original. Important key elements of the performance were brought back and had their special place maintained in the performance. Zamzuriah has had experience teaching other traditional dance ensembles at ASWARA, such as the *Tarinai*, a traditional Kelantanese martial arts dance consisting of multiple series of back bends. Her teaching experience is supplemented with her keen interest and knowledge of her students. According to Ted Solis (2004), "(i)n teaching ensembles we subject and resubject ourselves and our students to 'vicissitudes of translation', combining pedagogy, constant self-assessment, feedback that happens both in the moment and in semester and yearly evaluations, and the constant creative resynthesis of life experiences" (p. 2). Zamzuriah's training and understanding of *Mek Mulung* provide her with the background to create a strong curriculum for ASWARA. Three cohorts of students completed a semester of *Mek Mulung* which required them to stage a *Mek Mulung* performance to a live audience at the end of the semester. This student production involved a cast

comprising of students of ASWARA from various disciplines, such as from visual arts, performing arts, to scriptwriting.

Having students with different levels of proficiencies, there is the challenge of trial-and-error teaching and learning, experimentation with various techniques to suit different learning abilities as well as to meeting the demands of the university. This is what Sumarsam (2004) experienced in teaching Javanese *gamelan* at Wesleyan University in the USA (pp. 82-83). However, since most of his students were Malaysians and could speak the Malay language, the learning process was not as difficult if it is taught in a foreign language. As for teaching dance, Adrienne Kaeppler points out the students' lack of understanding of the performance grammar in which:

(t)he grammar of a movement idiom—like grammar of any language—involves structure, style, and meaning; and one must learn to recognize the movements that make up the system, how they can be stylistically varied, and their syntax (rules about how they can be put together to form motifs, phrases, larger forms, and whole pieces). Competence to understand specific pieces depends not only on movement itself, but on knowledge of cultural context and philosophy. (2000, p. 118)

Because of time constraint, imperfections during performances cannot be totally avoided when having to master skills that require several years. As an example, one weakness I notice from the recordings of the students' staging at ASWARA was a much faster tempo during the performance.

During the staging by ASWARA, students as well as musicians from the Wang Tepus troupe were involved as part of the performance. The Wang Tepus performers were involved not merely as advisors and instructors, but throughout the process collaborated with and performed alongside the students. As a core component of the curriculum, students who enrolled in the subject come from various disciplines within the performing

arts, and thus represented an array of performance abilities. Zamzuriah ensured that all of the students learnt basic dance steps, the music, form, and structure as well as the historical background of *Mek Mulung*. Zamzuriah as well as the practitioners of Wang Tepus shared their knowledge and expertise through simultaneously interacting and engaging in active discussions. After several weeks, with guidance from the instructors, the students themselves decided who among them would play specific roles for the performance that would be staged.

From my observations of the students' classroom experiences and having conversations with Zamzuriah, a lot of planning was involved to ensure that students acquired a wholesome experience during one semester of classes. The demand of classroom teaching of *gamelan* is also expressed by Roger Vetter (2004) whereby his 'ideal' teaching model which is very comprehensive that requires students to have as much knowledge of the theory and practice was challenged with the realization of having to confront issues of time, student engagement and commitment. In terms of *Mek Mulung*, besides students getting a one-semester exposure to the tradition, a more important impact of the classroom experience may be on the Wang Tepus practitioners themselves. From their direct experience in the teaching process for several semesters at ASWARA, some extent of pedagogical knowledge acquired during the classroom involvement can be taken home to apply them in teaching the younger generation of potential performers in Wang Tepus.

After several years, *Mek Mulung* was dropped as a subject in the core curriculum at ASWARA, and was replaced by *Mak Yong* or *Bangsawan*. Zamzuriah continues with her responsibility as the main contact person at ASWARA to consult with regard to the *Mek Mulung* dance and theatre in terms of its practical elements. She is now using her

knowledge of *Mek Mulung* to write her Master's thesis on its dance elements at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. From her conversations and sharing of thoughts with the village practitioners, and also spending an extended period staying in the village with them, Zamzuriah had sufficient exposure and personal experience to envision the ideal presentation of *Mek Mulung* that she wants to convey to the students of ASWARA. (See Chapter Six for a discussion on how Zamzuriah has made efforts to use *Mek Mulung* in other forms of contemporary theatre).

### **3.6 *Mek Mulung* in Other Academic Institutions**

*Mek Mulung* is currently being offered as an academic subject or topic as part of a curriculum in courses such as ethnomusicology, Malaysian music, and theatre studies in various institutions of higher learning. As a subject which is generally offered within a specialized field at the Diploma or Degree level, it does not however reach the majority of the student population. There is thus a small amount of awareness of *Mek Mulung* in Malaysian tertiary and secondary educational establishments, but it cannot be assumed that significantly greater awareness of the form was created following the success of the PPAG's work on *Mek Mulung*.

Following the successful staging of *Mek Mulung* by the PPAG, most academic institutions/organizations adopted the same performance format with minor variations in terms of the performance style. Apart from ASWARA being the pioneer institution of higher learning to introduce students to the *Mek Mulung* tradition as an academic subject, other universities including Universiti Malaya, SUNWAY University, and Universiti Teknologi MARA<sup>93</sup> have introduced *Mek Mulung* within their curriculum. In retrospect,

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<sup>93</sup> Short excerpts of the Universiti Teknologi MARA (jelaniugoh, 2016) performance are available via YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fotlvGuzRX0&t=170s> (Accessed on 15 April 2019).

these institutions have played a key role in promoting the concertized performance of *Mek Mulung* through different means, beyond the standard staging by professional performers in concert halls. Because these student productions are staged for paying public audiences, within this academic set-up, a greater and possibly better educated audience can be reached, especially among students.

Although these academic institutions have adopted different approaches in teaching *Mek Mulung*, in most cases they tend to conform with the concertized performance style of the PPAG, even pushing it further towards contemporary theatre. At SUNWAY University (Siew, 2012), for instance, my impression from witnessing their performance showed they have shifted towards a more contemporary approach to the performance.<sup>94</sup> As at ASWARA, Zamzuriah served as the main instructor for the *Mek Mulung* programs at SUNWAY University and Universiti Malaya. However, unlike at ASWARA, students at these institutions did not have the same level of interaction with the experts from Wang Tepus. At Universiti Malaya<sup>95</sup> Zamzuriah involved three experts from Wang Tepus only in the final three days prior to performance, but at SUNWAY University, there was no opportunity for students to interact with the Wang Tepus practitioners at all, with Zamzuriah as the sole instructor. Responses from students at Universiti Malaya have been very positive regarding their exposure to and interaction with the *Mek Mulung* experts who had come directly from Wang Tepus to participate in the teaching process and in staging the performance. These experts not only contributed to the successful staging of students' final performance, but more importantly made an impact on their *Mek Mulung* learning experience.

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<sup>94</sup> I watched and recorded the performance by the students at SUNWAY University, 8 October 2012. A YouTube video was made available by one of the students at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsFXsNhOCuI> (Accessed on April 15, 2019).

<sup>95</sup> A recording of the Universiti Malaya performance is made available through YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycvSPT7hQsQ&t=171s> (Accessed on 15 April 2019).

Universiti Malaya theatre and dance students performed the *Dewa Kaca* on 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2016 (Nesh Nesh, 2018). They experimented with incorporating Abang Mat, one of the three Wang Tepus experts, in the performance itself to perform some sections in the first verse of the responsorial line, which was then followed by the students and instructors as the chorus section. Zamzuriah proposed the idea of having Abang Mat perform some songs in the program to allow the audience to hear what the village Wang Tepus experts sound like, with the rest of the students and instructors singing in the urban reconstructed style. The students were instructed not to follow Abang Mat's melody lines because they comprised of multiple variants that were not identical for each strophic line. This performance created a unique experience in which the audience was able to listen to parts of the melody being sung in the style of Wang Tepus as well as those of the students' in an adjacent pattern.

From collaborations such as this one, members of the urban audience interested in *Mek Mulung*'s village presentation can hear the tradition from the practitioners themselves. At the same time, experts' direct involvement offers pedagogical and emotional support to the student players. The Universiti Malaya performance, which I observed during rehearsals and the performance, also incorporated sections in which Abang Mat danced in the later part of the performance. According to participants, his inclusion as a featured performer brought collective positive feelings not only for the student performers and the audience, but also to the experts themselves—in Zamzuriah's words, a feeling of *lepas angin* or emotional release. Wang Tepus performers like Abang Mat have not had opportunities to perform in the village or elsewhere for many years for various reasons, a key one being absence of financial support. Therefore, occasions for them to perform, especially in a context where their skills are valued, respected, and

highlighted, and with similar enthusiasm from an entirely different audience, are greatly meaningful to the Wang Tepus experts. I could sense Abang Mat's appreciation for the opportunity given to him as seen from the emotion that he projected while dancing during the performance, and I noticed tears of joy and satisfaction from the other Wang Tepus performers when it was over.

During this performance at Universiti Malaya, the audience was also introduced to the concept of performing in the *bangsal* (Figure 3.6). The performers were seated under a canopy that was supposed to symbolize and represent the traditional space for village performances. Although its size did not accurately reflect the exact dimensions of the *bangsal* of Wang Tepus, it provided some sort of perspective of what it would be like when *Mek Mulung* was normally performed outdoors in the traditional context. A variety of colorful flowers decorated the roof of the stage *bangsal*; although in the village *bangsal*, flowers are hung on the *tiang seri* or the special pillar, in both cases the flowers served a related decorative purpose.

The 2016 *Mek Mulung* performance at Universiti Malaya can be considered as one of the most creatively and sensitively considered performances to date that has made efforts to include the participation of the Wang Tepus practitioners in its staging. Although some of the ASWARA performances did include the Wang Tepus performers as musicians, their involvement was not as prominent as in the performance at Universiti Malaya. The Wang Tepus aesthetics were introduced to the Universiti Malaya audience who gave them positive reviews. Given that the *kampung* and the concertized *Mek Mulung* have become independent of each other, this model might enable future institutions to bridge the performance styles so that they are able to co-exist and interact on a more equal basis, providing the best of both worlds.



Figure 3.6: *Bangsai* used in the Universiti Malaya performance of *Dewa Kaca* in 2016. (Photograph taken by the author).

For the performance at SUNWAY University, Zamzuriah chose a contemporary approach to reconstruct *Mek Mulung*. Since *Mek Mulung* was taught only as part of a small component within the course structure at SUNWAY, there were no plans to stage it for a live audience. This performance was done in class and no musicians were involved. To supplement the lack of traditional *Mek Mulung* musical instruments, clapping was used to simulate the sound of the *kecerek* when performers entered the performance space. The dance was choreographed using the dance gestures of the *Mek Mulung*. The three songs which were performed were the Gerak Timpuh, Burong Odang and the Masuk ke Taman, with no music accompanying the dance. The advantage of using this approach is that all the students had the opportunity to learn and perform the dance moves together at the same time.



Learning and performing the tradition of *Mek Mulung* is no longer confined to higher learning institutions. Its potential as an academic subject for younger students has been explored by the leadership of the national Performing Arts Schools (*Sekolah Seni*). A good example is the initiative taken by the *Sekolah Seni Perak* (Perak Performing Arts School), in Sungai Siput, Perak which invited Zamzuriah to teach the students and choreograph a short five-minute presentation to introduce the *Mek Mulung* internationally at the Monolit Festival in Barcelona, Spain from 27<sup>th</sup> October to 1<sup>st</sup> November 2017. Representing Malaysia, a group of five students with their teacher participated in the competition with groups from 26 other nations. In a video produced by New Straits Times Online, it shows that the music ensemble consists of a frame drum, a pair of *canang* (a pair of gong chime in a rack), and a hanging knobbed gong. The costumes used by the student performers resemble those which were worn by the PPAG in their performances. It was such an unexpected and welcome surprise to the young students when they won the top prize in their age category. This unexpected accomplishment produced much publicity back in Malaysia (Teh Athira, 2017), and comments in the media implied the nation's acknowledgement that *Mek Mulung* performance has now achieved international recognition. This "novelty factor" can potentially lead to a greater appreciation of this traditional Kedah art.

### **3.7 The Birth of Amateur Groups Experimenting with *Mek Mulung***

The concertized *Mek Mulung* appears to have been growing in popularity in recent years within both performing and mediated arts. Factors such as the *Sekolah Seni Perak*'s surprise win in an international competition with a *Mek Mulung*-derived piece<sup>96</sup> have

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<sup>96</sup> A recording of the performance was published by a local newspaper, The New Straits Times, via YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vNuSXP1jK14> (Accessed on 15 April 2019).

made it a new sensation, offering a “new” old theatre form to be explored and further rejuvenated (NST Online, 2017). As a result, a number of amateur organizations and groups, in spite of lacking professional performers and other resources, have shown interest in taking up this theatre as a new form of entertainment. Videos of recorded performances have been uploaded to video-sharing websites, and access to various materials associated with the performance have become more widely available for consumption through the internet. Many amateur groups have emerged to experiment with and offer their own renditions of *Mek Mulung*. These amateur groups frequently upload their efforts to internet video sharing sites to inform the mass public of their activities; this has made versions of *Mek Mulung* even more widely circulated and distributed.

Following the dissolution of the PPAG, whose promotion of *Mek Mulung* and performances have become iconic in its history, new professional performing arts groups organised via the Kedah state JKKN and local higher learning institutions began to fill the vacuum by staging *Mek Mulung* performances publicized as a new traditional revival art form. After sponsoring a nationwide tour in 2013, the Kedah state JKKN claimed to have reached far more audiences outside of *Mek Mulung*’s usual urban stages of Kuala Lumpur and its home base of Wang Tepus. Recognizing that the large-scale, concertized, urban form has a niche national audience in larger cities, smaller independent groups and theatre clubs have seized the opportunity to stage the *Mek Mulung* to cater for different groups of audiences with the more limited resources available to them. These groups include those performing for high school plays<sup>97</sup>, district level festivals such as the *Semarak Seni Budaya* (Enlivening Arts and Culture) on 10<sup>th</sup>–11<sup>th</sup> August 2018,<sup>98</sup> and various official

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<sup>97</sup> As described by Pak Saad’s daughter, Nurul, when she was not invited to participate in her school’s performance of *Mek Mulung*, which is discussed in Section 3.4.6 in this Chapter.

<sup>98</sup> During this festival, a *Mek Mulung* workshop was held which I attended during the day. A *Mek Mulung* performance was staged during the finale of the two-day festival (Atok Vlog Channel, 2018). A recording of the

functions, such as at the National Banquet at the King's Palace in Kuala Lumpur<sup>99</sup> (Razif, 2016).

The algorithms of video-uploading websites, such as YouTube, also yield insights into what others have been producing under the name of *Mek Mulung*. Included in the array of earlier videos uploaded online are whole professional *Mek Mulung* performances, or excerpts of performances, of the concertized version. These have served as the base for various groups endeavouring to restage the performances through their own uploaded videos. Many of these “homage” videos are clearly created without much prior knowledge of either of the key performance styles, and certainly without consulting with or gaining approval from the Wang Tepus performers themselves.

Wide variations in performance styles and structures in these videos have resulted from the creators' own interpretations of *Mek Mulung*, based on videos of professional performances. Some performances add new music, in addition to the known repertoire. Others include new and even foreign stories into the performances. In one of the uploaded videos, a *Mek Mulung* performance was staged as part of an event to celebrate World Heart Day in 2017. This *Mek Mulung* presentation is titled *Si Jantung Hati* or ‘The one dearest to my heart’ (WazuWardi, 2017).<sup>100</sup> This performance begins with an opening song which the JKKN Kedah developed to welcome the audience and has been played during their *Mek Mulung* performances. With easy access to concertized *Mek Mulung* on the internet, it has been easy and convenient for groups, without much accurate knowledge, to replicate performances based on their own interpretations. These amateur

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performance was uploaded via YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7r82fMHLaH0&t=146s> (Accessed on 15 April 2019).

<sup>99</sup> A rehearsal recording of the performance is available via YouTube (Razif, 2016) where an excerpt of the *Mek Mulung*, the ‘Gerak Timpuh’ was performed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Y9aHjqU-mQ> (Accessed on 15 April 2019).

<sup>100</sup> The performance of *Si Jantung Hati* is available via YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ufxuvqr9pUI&t=226s> (Accessed on 15 April 2019).

performances then get uploaded and recirculated by audiences and performers themselves, contributing to a market of online *Mek Mulung* materials which have become infused with a multitude of performance styles, thus blurring and potentially compromising the distinctive factors that identify *Mek Mulung* as a separate traditional form.

This digital content has even reached the fringes of Wang Tepus village. During one my visits for an interview session with Pak Saad and his family at their home, one of the issues raised was concerning the variety of *Mek Mulung* performances outside of Wang Tepus. Pak Saad's daughter, Nurul, indicated that she was not surprised with the situation. She acknowledged her awareness of the many different groups restaging them elsewhere, and noted that many have lost sight of the connection of the actual meaning and content of the performances. She also expressed her dismay that her own high school had staged a *Mek Mulung* performance during one of their extra-curricular activity programs. She was not aware of the planned presentation and had not seen any rehearsals taking place. When I asked her if she was invited to participate, since she would have more knowledge and experience than her peers having come from a family of *Mek Mulung* practitioners, she said she had no knowledge of the presentation until the day it was staged. It would seem unusual for the school to stage a *Mek Mulung* performance without recognizing and taking advantage of the talents within their own community to which the tradition ultimately belongs. A possible explanation for the community's claim over the tradition is that in searching for a location for the troupe to have its base, the early performers decided to settle in the village of Wang Tepus as the home of their *Mek Mulung* tradition. Even though *Mek Mulung* practitioners come from the same family lineage, the tradition cannot be claimed as belonging to the family because the performance is associated with the village which will remain, while family members may move out of the

village. As for a suggestion that *Mek Mulung* be recognized as representing a part of Malay heritage, its sole and specific existence in Wang Tepus, Kedah may not have the characteristics to become a representative of all Malay traditions throughout Malaysia.

The fact that the concertized *Mek Mulung* form, with models easily available in mediated forms, was referred to for staging at the local high school suggests that the concertized version is now metaphorically “closer” to current villagers, and preferred by them, than the version that is geographically closer to home. What is more disappointing is that they did not even know there was a direct descendant of the *Mek Mulung* tradition within the school, and apparently had no interest in accessing the background of the village tradition. Despite being in close proximity to the *Mek Mulung* tradition in its original form, the focus was on staging the concertized *Mek Mulung* version, rather than accessing and enhancing knowledge about a tradition which has historically been a central part of their village.

### **3.8 Conclusion**

*Mek Mulung* has undergone a rapid transformation process throughout the last few decades during which the PPAG and the Wang Tepus practitioners brought the performance to the proscenium stage. The urban concertized *Mek Mulung* now can be clearly identified as possessing certain characteristics that are both distinctive, and packaged to suit urban stages and audiences. It has developed into a more formal type of presentation to entertain audiences who sit passively in an auditorium. (Further discussion is in Chapter Five). The performance has become less improvisational in nature, and more scripted and well-rehearsed. The content of the performance has shifted its centre of

importance to giving more weight to the theatre aspect, rather than to its ritual aspect: its intricate and long opening and closing sequences.

As *Mek Mulung* expands its influence nationally and becomes the newest old tradition on the circuit—one of the latest trends or current vogues in traditional performance theatre—the separation between the village-based performance of the Wang Tepus practitioners and the urban-based concertized performance by professionally-trained performers appears to have grown. They can exist simultaneously, and efforts by some researcher-performers like Zamzuriah have been made to encourage the two to grow together. But I suggest that the relationship between them has become more distant than it used to be when the PPAG troupe first collaborated with the Wang Tepus performers. The growing acceptance of the concertized version as the “heritage” version, and the attention that it draws nationally and now internationally, have brought this version closer to Wang Tepus and villages directly surrounding it, leading even some of these people to be more familiar and knowledgeable about the concertized version than their own village version. As more of the younger generation leave the village of Wang Tepus, leaving only the elders behind, the number of people having the knowledge of the village *Mek Mulung* tradition will continue to diminish. Newer settlers who come to the village mostly to acquire cheap land for retirement purposes have generally come from outside the vicinity; they are not familiar with the Wang Tepus tradition.

The concertized form, however, should not be viewed entirely negatively in terms of its impact on *Mek Mulung*. Regional and national institutions can provide a platform for further development of the concertized form, one that takes the Wang Tepus form into more active and positive consideration as a source. Active discussions, experimentation, and collaboration among those concerned must continue to ensure *Mek Mulung*’s future

is protected and enhanced. Old and new aesthetics of the performance can be continually brought into dialogue, among academics, students, holders of the tradition, and performing arts enthusiasts to achieve a middle ground and provide a solution to what might be deemed the optimum portrayal of *Mek Mulung* in various environments.

Individuals like Zamzuriah, who are influential within the arts community, have more power to make changes to the concertized *Mek Mulung* format initially established by the PPAG. The format that PPAG developed more than a decade ago was appropriate to suit their needs at that time. Zamzuriah challenges these decisions and proceeds to introduce new, more inclusive approaches to the staging of *Mek Mulung* on the proscenium stage. Apart from staging performances and teaching *Mek Mulung* in various institutions, she is one of the key sources for the JKKN, at the state as well as the national level. Among her projects for 2018 was to produce a recording of the village *Mek Mulung* song repertoire, and to write a book on the same topic.<sup>101</sup> However, due to funding problems, these projects are put on hold at the present time. She serves as a creative middle ground—a culture broker in classic terms (Jang, 2017; Kurin, 1997)—and is currently helping the Kedah state JKKN to find the way most accommodating to the Wang Tepus style in staging *Mek Mulung* for future productions.

Zamzuriah's direct and long relationship under the tutelage of the late Pak Leh is what drives her to promote Kedah's *Mek Mulung* and to bring the performance to greater heights, despite her roots are from Kelantan rather than Kedah. Her commitment as a key individual in the scene to promote *Mek Mulung* through her own creative visions may indeed be one of the reasons that the performance form continues to be actively discussed in the Malaysian media currently.

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<sup>101</sup> This was mentioned by Zamzuriah to me during the workshop which we both conducted on 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018.

Despite active discussions on the nature and future of *Mek Mulung* within academia and professional spheres, there is still a gap in understanding how the general public, who has historically lacked exposure to and opportunities to participate in *Mek Mulung*-related activities, perceive it as a performance. Apart from their responses to interviews, there is little that can be understood about performance goers' understanding of the *Mek Mulung* performance. The patchy digital content of amateur performances of *Mek Mulung* online reveals that digital media is a flawed tool in the dissemination of accurate information to a mass nationwide audience. From my observation, there are cases where theatre performances comprising characters named *Puteri*, *Raja*, *Awang* and *Inang* performed in northern Malay dialect, may be understood as a “*Mek Mulung*” presentation; whereas these elements are insufficient for a production to be labeled as *Mek Mulung*. As an example, the performance in conjunction with World Heart Day, as reported by WazuWardi (2017). There currently appears to be a multitude of understandings and misunderstandings across all levels of society concerning “what” *Mek Mulung* really is.

It is inevitable that the idea of what constitutes *Mek Mulung* will continue to change and develop over time. And it also seems likely that, with more online media content becoming accessible to the public along with the packaged idea in educational institutions of how *Mek Mulung* should be presented, it is the concertized *Mek Mulung* form that will become entrenched as the mainstream form of performance. As it becomes normalized as the mainstream version, and with the Wang Tepus performers having few, or no, opportunities to stage performances in their village, there is the possibility that without intervention, Wang Tepus inhabitants and perhaps even practitioners themselves will end up accepting the concertized performance as the “new” version of *Mek Mulung*. The performers have accepted the practice of preferring to perform with borrowed



costumes from Kedah state JKKN. They have also invited performances by urban performers to their *bangsal*, and they are impressed with the concertized performances which they are able to access through the internet. It is quite possible that they may borrow more elements of the concertized version and incorporate these into their own. As mentioned earlier, village practitioners are already telling researchers who want to document the traditional *Mek Mulung* to refer to the state JKKN, suggesting that the concertized form is already considered a representative of a “true” *Mek Mulung* presentation.

The decline in the frequency of the village performances in Wang Tepus, which results in diminished opportunities for the general public to be exposed to the traditional form of *Mek Mulung*, is perhaps the main reason that there are now many different interpretations of the performance. There are no active references to serve as guidelines for outside performers who wish to present an informed performance, and there are few resource persons, even within the Wang Tepus community, who can be sought out for reliable information about *Mek Mulung*, and many of them are now elderly. In view of these issues, the possible full detachment of *Mek Mulung* from its natural base of Wang Tepus may become a reality which I find difficult to accept.

## Chapter 4

### Portraying *Mek Mulung* as Heritage

#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to discuss the events leading to the declaration of *Mek Mulung* as Kedah State Heritage in 2014. The discussion will focus on various activities and revival efforts undertaken to reinforce and support the proposal of *Mek Mulung* as worthy and appropriate as state heritage and the political as well as social implications of this designation for various parties during the process. At the end I will suggest some possible consequences of having heritage status conferred on *Mek Mulung* in this way, and evaluate whether it will benefit its performance in the long run, or conversely contribute towards its decline.

#### 4.2 Reconstructing the *Mek Mulung* Revival

According to Hill and Bithell, “a musical revival comprises of an effort to perform and promote music that is valued as old or historical and is usually perceived to be threatened or moribund” (2016, p. 3). Hill and Bithell further state that:

revivals, by definition, depend on some kind of relationship with the past. Most often they seek to reintroduce forgotten, abandoned, neglected, suppressed, or otherwise interrupted practices from the past into the present. They may also stem from a desire to restore the integrity of present practices that are seen to have lost some defining aspect of their original form or meaning. (2016, p. 12)

According to Livingston (1999), one of the most important features of music revivals is the central role played by a few individuals which she refers to as the “core revivalists”. These individuals, “whether ‘insiders’ to the tradition or ‘outsiders,’ tend to feel such a strong connection with the revival tradition that they take it upon themselves to ‘rescue’ it from extinction and to pass it to others” (1999, p. 70).

With reference to *Mek Mulung*, efforts towards its revival have involved it being taken out of its traditional base in the village of Wang Tepus, where it is performed by the hereditary guardians of the tradition, and presented in an altered form as a concertized performance by professional performers in the urban capital of Kuala Lumpur and other large cities and regional centers. A tradition that has served various functions in the village community now provides a purely entertainment function to an audience with an entirely different background. Hill and Bithell (2016) consider this recontextualization a shift from a “participatory” to a “presentational” performance. A similar observation is made by Akins and Binson (2011) whereby the movement from “historical” performance contexts to “modern” ones as found in the *Lanna* music and dance in Chiang Mai, Thailand, produces a shift for the audience from “participatory” roles to “spectator/onlooker” roles. Promoting a presentational form of *Mek Mulung* to a wider spectator audience, largely made up of those from middle-class backgrounds, is however believed to be the appropriate step towards ensuring the continuity of the tradition, and it is the case that what I have called concertization has—for the moment—ensured *Mek Mulung*’s sustained presence into the current day.

As Hill and Bithell have noted, external forces often play a significant role in reviving traditions as a means to protect them from further decline and avoid total extinction. “Revivals are often set in motion by individuals or clearly defined groups who

are partial outsiders to the chosen tradition rather than core culture-bearers” (2016, p. 15).

Baumann identified important processes and motivations for revival as,

historically speaking, the impulse to keep alive or to revitalize traditions that are disappearing is a postulate that predominantly came, and still comes, from outsiders. Outsiders discover these “unknown” traditions and integrate them into a rather pessimistic world concept of culture in decline. Travelers, intellectuals and researchers “discover” folk traditions with which they previously were not familiar. Outsider interest starts to attribute values to these “old” and “orally transmitted” traditions. At the beginning this discovery by outsiders brings about a kind of new evaluation by defining “these particular musical traditions” as worthy of being kept alive, of being protected, cultivated, documented, studied and promoted in order to save them from extinction. (1966, p. 74)

In the case of *Mek Mulung*, the revivalists have indeed been middle-class outsiders of the tradition. With their professional knowledge and experience of staging concert performances, and their understanding of urban and international audiences, alongside the authority bestowed upon them as social elites, the performance “architects” of the concertized form consider it is their responsibility to present a performance that meets the new audiences’ expectations. As we have seen in previous chapters, their creativity and innovation in making changes and inserting new elements into the performances have resulted in various transformations in the concertized version of *Mek Mulung* from the existing village tradition. This revived version currently appears to be achieving its target of attaining a measure of popularity in its new contexts and acceptance by its new audience. But what then happens to the survival of the village tradition, which its guardians are trying hard to maintain largely on their own?

As a political strategy to promote cultural tourism amidst rising concern about traditional performances diminishing due to industrial development, since the 1950s

governments worldwide have been motivated to declare certain traditions within a particular region to be state or national heritage (Kurin, 2004, p. 68). Since the introduction of an international organization to oversee this process, UNESCO's Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage in 2001, many tradition-bearers around the world have aimed towards achieving international heritage status backed by UNESCO (pp. 68-69). In 2014, the State of Kedah declared *Mek Mulung* as a "state traditional theatre heritage" in recognition that it is verifiably a historical tradition, uniquely found in Kedah, of great significance to the state, and under threat; it thus should be given due protection. Through sponsorship from a local private developer, a pictorial coffee table book on *Mek Mulung* was published by the Institute of Translation and Books, Malaysia (*Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia*—ITBM), and launched by the Kedah Chief Minister in October 2014 to commemorate the declaration of *Mek Mulung*'s state heritage status. During the launch, the Chief Minister Dato' Seri Mukhriz Mahathir said in his speech, "With this, tonight I declare *Mek Mulung* as Kedah State heritage. To further this declaration, there will be several efforts that will be done by the state together with the help of various sources, particularly ITBM and BDB (a private property development company based in Kedah) to promote this traditional theater at a national and international level. At the same time, it provides a path for *Mek Mulung* to one day to be considered as a recipient of UNESCO world heritage, God willing".<sup>102</sup> At the launch, a concertized version of the *Mek Mulung* was presented by AKRAB, while the village practitioners were invited to the launch as distinguished guests.

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<sup>102</sup> A video of this speech can be viewed through a YouTube link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-koEzB6ySMo&t=3757s> (Accessed on 13 May 2019). Dato' Seri Mukhriz Mahathir's actual words in his speech were "Maka saya dengan sukacitanya pada mala mini mengumumkan Mek Mulung sebagai warisan Kedah. Susulan pengiktirafan ini pelbagai usaha akan digerakkan kerajaan negeri dengan kerjasama pihak tertentu, khususnya ITBM dan BDB untuk mempromosikan teater tradisional ini ke peringkat nasional dan antarabangsa. Sekali gus membuka jalan untuk membolehkan Mek Mulung suatu hari nanti dipertimbangkan UNESCO sebagai world heritage, atau warisan dunia, In Syaa Allah".

However, since the launch in 2014, there has been no substantial aid from the state which the Chief Minister had earlier indicated. It was only in March 2019 that Zamzuriah and another lecturer from Universiti Malaya were asked by the Department of National Heritage to prepare a dossier to be submitted to UNESCO for an application to have *Mek Mulung* considered and recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage.<sup>103</sup>

An issue that has been raised with regard to obtaining UNESCO heritage status is the question of ownership. The natural guardians of the tradition can no longer claim sole ownership, as it now belongs to “everybody” in the state/nation, and not to a specific group which would have special interest in ensuring financial support and sustainability. According to Ronstrom:

(t)radition brings about ownership and cultural rights: The local tradition produced is understood as belonging to the locals. Heritage tends to resist local people’s claims for indigenous rights. Heritage tends to “empty” objects and spaces, which makes it possible to refill them with all kinds of owners and inhabitants. Whereas tradition can be produced locally, the production of heritage is centralized and produces something beyond local and regional, beyond the distinctive, the ethnic, the multicultural. It is everybody’s and therefore nobody’s. (2016, p. 53)

A common misconception around attaining UNESCO heritage status is that art forms so designated receive financial assistance from the international body in the form of regular grants for funding various activities. With the exception of a few special cases, Seeger (2015) clarifies that, “(t)he actual funding for most cultural activities comes not from the UNESCO budget but from the budgets of each country” (n.p.).

The co-existence of the traditional *Mek Mulung* troupe in Wang Tepus village and their ritual performances, with the professional performers and their concert presentations of *Mek Mulung* in urban areas, parallels the situation of the *ca trù* traditional music

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<sup>103</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2019.

ensemble in Vietnam, which has likewise been subject to application for heritage status (Norton, 2014). Norton notes that the Vietnamese government worked very hard towards obtaining UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Status for *ca trù*. However, he has also observed that after getting this recognition, it has become a struggle for the tradition to sustain itself without obtaining financial support from UNESCO. In view of this, it is worth questioning the justification for striving towards UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status for *Mek Mulung* if it may not contribute materially towards the tradition's sustainability.

Another example closer to home is the case of *Mak Yong* in the state of Kelantan. Another dance-drama form, *Mak Yong* was listed under a UNESCO Proclamation of Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005 (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2014). This international recognition is widely celebrated as a moment of national pride for Malaysia, although ironically it is currently banned in its home state (Hanis, 2017), which is governed by the opposition political party. Since achieving independence, the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) has governed the state of Kelantan for the longest time (Muhammad Syukri, 1999). PAS's ideal governance emphasizes a strong "belief that realization of comprehensive Islamic way of life could not be attained unless one has the political, hence the establishment of an Islamic State" (Muhammad Syukri, 1999, p. 239). This ideology also means that anything that goes against its values, such as *Mak Yong* which the government asserts to contain unIslamic elements should not be staged.<sup>104</sup> *Mak Yong* performances nonetheless continue to be sponsored to entertain audiences in private

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<sup>104</sup> The states of Kelantan and Perlis do not have cinemas. An online article by MalaysiaKini on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2019 includes a quote by the state Local Government, Housing and Health committee Chairperson Izani Husin who says that "we can impose strict conditions for cinema operators but there will still be room for social ills. After discussions, the government decided that there will be no cinemas in the state." <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/468846> (Accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> March 2019).

realms, such as in local residents' home compounds. This has led to a common perception that the ban has been imposed and lifted several times; however, the Kelantan State authority insists that the ban has been imposed continuously.

Despite the restrictions imposed on *Mak Yong* performances in Kelantan, performers are encouraged by the increased interest shown by UNESCO through its acknowledgement of *Mak Yong*'s special status. Thus, some *Mak Yong* practitioners have left Kelantan for the big cities such as Kuala Lumpur to continue their performances. Others continue the tradition by taking up teaching positions on a full-time or part-time basis in academic institutions. Among these institutions are Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Malaya (UM), and ASWARA. *Mak Yong* continues to be actively performed on urban stages.

However, as with *Mek Mulung*, the rate of new students acquiring the performing skills through the traditional way within the village context is declining (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2014). Performances that cater to urban audiences are likewise now adjusted towards the expectations of proscenium stage performances. Certain rituals traditionally associated with the performances have been omitted, or if performed are shielded from public view. The initial purpose of getting *Mak Yong* recognized by UNESCO in its heritage list was to protect it from its demise—instead, it is regarded by some as contributing towards its further decline because its village practitioners are unsupported; all the value (cultural and monetary) conveyed by heritage status goes to the urban “revived” version.

An action plan submitted during *Mak Yong*'s candidature application for the UNESCO list was not fully realized on the part of the National Heritage Department upon achieving the award. With the state ban on *Mak Yong* in place, there is very little that can be done to improve the lot of the traditional performers, even with pressures from



UNESCO to lift the ban<sup>105</sup> (Hanis, 2017). Ghulam-Sarwar (2014) reported that he was involved in the bid, but had expressed his regret at putting in all the effort to get *Mak Yong* recognized as a UNESCO intangible heritage, as this status now has very little meaning for the local people in Kelantan. Instead, he suggested a more beneficial way that the genre could sustain itself would perhaps be through various initiatives at the grass roots level in the village or *kampung* context, and extended further at the national level.

To date, *Mak Yong* is the sole Malaysian performing arts to be listed in the UNESCO heritage list. This created much rivalry among other performing arts genres to be the next to be accorded international recognition. Ever since the early days of revivalist *Mek Mulung* performances by the PPAG in Kuala Lumpur, newspapers have reported that one aim of the revival is to gain recognition for *Mek Mulung* through UNESCO, with the rationale that by achieving such status, *Mek Mulung* would be saved from declining further.

The National Department of Arts and Culture (JKKN) is responsible for bringing *Mek Mulung*, *Mak Yong* and other traditional and local performance forms to wider audiences. Just as other government institutions are expected to promote the idea of national identity, certain national ideals are expected to be portrayed in *Mek Mulung* performances to attract recognition. Because JKKN is now the main agency responsible for preserving and promoting these traditional performances, certain aspects inevitably have to be reconstructed to conform to the new setting. In *Mek Mulung's* case, I have already described in Chapter Three how the reconstructed version created and performed by the PPAG was remodelled on the lines of concertized *Mak Yong* performances. When

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<sup>105</sup> On September 2017, a United Nations Special Rapporteur, Karima Bennoune, during an official visit to Malaysia urged the state government to lift the ban on three major performing arts in Kelantan: the *Dikir Barat*, *Main Puteri* and the *Mak Yong*. Her visit was to assess cultural rights in Malaysia which she will present in the United Nations at a later date.

the PPAG ceased to exist on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2012, following which the Kedah state JKKN took over the staging of *Mek Mulung* concert performances and this has continued to the present, with their latest performance being staged in August 2018.

The PPAG performance model continues to set the standard for state-sponsored *Mek Mulung* performance groups, particularly AKRAB, a Kedah-based theatre group, and the Kedah state JKKN. Nonetheless, some variations and transformations can be expected as a result of input from those state-sponsored professionals who have now become the holders of the new reconstructed performance.

The village-based *Mek Mulung* still continues sporadically in Wang Tepus with its annual *Sembah Guru* ritual performances, and occasional performances to fulfil requests or invitations from inside and outside groups and agencies. There has been very little change in the way the bearers of the tradition themselves continue to perform. Their commitment to present the traditional village version is recognized nationally; they get invited to give lectures and demonstrations to college students, and they are also sought out by performance makers and concert producers for their opinions and suggestions in planning performances. However, there is a strong current risk of the village tradition becoming extinct, as a new generation of troupe members is yet to emerge to take over from current members of the village troupe, who are mostly advanced in age. Efforts to ensure the continuity of the village *Mek Mulung* have always relied on the tradition bearers themselves, whose more and more infrequent performances and lack of addition of new troupe members both pose difficulties for survival. Outside forces, such as my role as a researcher and advocate, together with Zamzuriah, will almost certainly need to be mobilized to encourage and help generate new troupe members to be trained by the old experts, and to see that a new generation of *Mek Mulung* village performers are prepared

to take over when the time comes. Suggestions to improve the vitality of *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus will be discussed in Chapter Seven.

#### 4.3 Placing *Mek Mulung* Heritage in Perspective

Even before the 2014 declaration of *Mek Mulung* as Kedah state heritage, there have been questions regarding which aspects of *Mek Mulung* qualified it as deserving heritage status (Mohd Ghouse, 2016; Suhaimi, 2008). Now that there are two versions of *Mek Mulung* with separate identities, how do they complicate what constitutes the “state heritage” version of *Mek Mulung*? Is its village identity exclusively understood only by the people of Wang Tepus and a few academic researchers, while the general public, who are only exposed to the concertized version, only appreciate this appropriated version as the “real thing”?

In this section, I discuss this issue from the perspective of the definition of intangible cultural heritage contained in Article 2 of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage,<sup>106</sup> at the UNESCO General Conference in Paris on 17 October 2003, which states that:

(the) ‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2)

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<sup>106</sup> Blake (2017) uses the same definition in discussing the dual characteristics of heritage in terms to its universal value and its special meaning and value for local and bearer communities.

In the process of establishing a consensus definition of intangible cultural heritage, a central question that needs to be addressed is who is the appropriate authority to make the final decision: the bearers of the culture themselves, professional experts, or state agencies. Based on the dominant opinion of the group of experts at the 2002 Convention that the ultimate authority should be the bearers themselves, the significance of promoting intangible cultural heritage which the “communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” was further emphasized (van Zanten, 2009, p. 38). Despite the strong argument that the communities themselves should have the power to determine what should be preserved as heritage, however, because of the bureaucracy involved, it is almost certain that in most cases the decision about what should be promoted would be made by the state or a government agency.

Although institutions like UNESCO have guidelines on identifying what constitutes heritage, as well as an established action plan to safeguard intangible traditions<sup>107</sup>, it may not be adaptable in all situations. Values accorded to a particular heritage may differ from one location to another, and the dynamics of living traditions also must be taken into account. Safeguarding a tradition does and should not imply keeping it static. As Schippers (2016) points out, it may even be detrimental to preserve traditions by freezing them, as we have seen in part with *Mak Yong*. Traditions should be able to evolve positively within their communities to adapt to social changes and to meet the new demands of their audiences. In the case of *Mek Mulung*, throughout the duration of this research, I have witnessed a trend of decreasing local interest in this tradition. Sources of entertainment from other more popular alternatives are replacing the need for *Mek Mulung* performances. It is an irony that while very few people within the village

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<sup>107</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Kit (UNESCO, 2008)

community are interested into keeping the tradition alive, at the same time outside groups, especially those not associated with the tradition, are recognizing and drawing on its uniqueness to create new, urban, traditional forms of entertainment for larger and very different audiences.

Since 2002 when *Mek Mulung* began to be performed outside of Wang Tepus by outsiders in a concertized format, it has received increased attention from beyond Wang Tepus, especially from students and academic researchers, as well as government agencies and private organizations and individuals such as documentary makers.<sup>108</sup> The outcomes from these efforts mostly circulate within the realm of academia. *Mek Mulung*'s presence in the wider world outside of Wang Tepus is comparatively small still, and thus interest among the general public is still limited. Unfortunately, despite intermittent excitement expressed by various parties outside of Wang Tepus about its potential, consequent activities and projects have not yet contributed enough to promote greater interest within the younger generation of potential performers, nor spurred the ageing performers within the village to revitalize *Mek Mulung* within their community.

The *Mek Mulung* tradition has for some time left behind the days when village folks eagerly looked forward to its performances as the troupes made their appearances from one place to another. Currently, it no longer presents itself as a tradition that serves an entertainment function for the village audience. But ritualistic aspects associated with supernatural beliefs, which are essential components of the tradition, have continued to be practiced, even though the performances are no longer received with as much enthusiasm as they used to be. To the community of Wang Tepus, the *Sembah Guru* performance (the ritual as a salutation to the ancestors of the *Mek Mulung* performers) is accepted as a

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<sup>108</sup> Personal communication with Pak Saad, 18 March 2018.

necessary yearly ritual to ensure that their village and community continue to receive protection from their spiritual guardians. It is the strong belief in the need to continue making *Sembah Guru* performances to ensure their safety that has thus far enabled the continuity of the *Mek Mulung* tradition, and avoided it becoming obsolete.

Even so, the annual *Sembah Guru* performance may be losing its importance within the community—since 2011 there have been a number of years when *Mek Mulung* was not performed in the traditional *bangsal*. The last known public performance of *Sembah Guru* was prior to the declaration of *Mek Mulung* as a state heritage status in 2014. However, according to Pak Saad, as the current leader of the troupe, ritual performances on a small scale took place in those years behind closed doors, to compensate for the absence of the usual *Sembah Guru* performance (Real Touch, 2018). Ensuring that the ritual practice continues to be carried out, although in a nonconventional way, sends a message to the community about its importance within the belief system of the community. But this ritual function plays no role in the concertized *Mek Mulung* that is what is now promoted as state heritage in Kedah.

#### **4.4 Agency Policy and Heritage Acts**

Increased interest towards traditional performances among urban audiences and the popularity of concertized versions of traditional performances have paved the way for *Mek Mulung* to be more visible as a tradition. It did not take long for the key government agencies to take notice of its potential as a traditional stage entertainment product.

The final staging of the PPAG's *Mek Mulung Cahaya Bulan* in 2011 coincided with the announcement of the disbandment of the PPAG on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2012 (Hizreen, 2012), which was to be followed by a national tour of *Mek Mulung* towards the end of the

same year ('Six states to see Mek Mulong', 2012). It was in early 2013 that the national tour took place covering six different states, this time sponsored by the Kedah state JKKN. A lecture symposium on the topic of *Mek Mulung* ('Mek Mulung sebagai pemangkin', 2013) was held at the Kedah state branch of the National Arts and Culture Department auditorium at the end of that year. The three speakers of the Symposium were all officers from the state civil service.

The first presentation discussed the importance of the *Mek Mulung* "brand" as an acknowledged state cultural product. Very little was presented on how *Mek Mulung* could be sustained in the long term. None of the three speakers had plans to engage with practitioners in Wang Tepus nor proposed plans to rejuvenate *Mek Mulung* within its originating community. The third speaker, who talked about how to promote *Mek Mulung* as a cultural product, provided general action plans such as efforts towards improving research and developing side products that could be commodified, such as crafts and video recordings (see Chapter Six). One interesting suggestion to promote *Mek Mulung* was to develop a "one-stop centre" to cater for tourists. An example of a potential model given by the speaker was the Sarawak Cultural Complex ('Mek Mulung sebagai pemangkin', 2013, p. 72). A better one would have been the Kelantan *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppet), or *Dalang Pak Dain's Wayang Kulit* Gallery in Kelantan. *Wayang Kulit* memorabilia are exhibited here and visitors are taken on a tour of the workshop where puppet-making is demonstrated. There is also a small stage or *kelir* where some of his shows are staged.<sup>109</sup> The Gallery is often visited by tourists and merchandise such as recorded performances are sold at this location. In contrast to the Sarawak Cultural

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<sup>109</sup> *Dalang Pak Dain* is very famous for his collaboration with Tintoy Chuo, a graphic artist for their new creation of Star Wars characters made into puppets which they call *Wayang Kulit Fusion*. *Peperangan Bintang* (Star Wars) performances have been staged on numerous occasions, gaining fame among Malaysian and international Star Wars fans.

Complex, which promotes a general tourist experience of Sarawak tribal culture, Pak Dain's *Wayang Kulit* Gallery specifically focuses on Kelantan *Wayang Kulit*.

By and large, the people of Wang Tepus have not been involved in the state's promotion of *Mek Mulung* through its various activities aimed at promoting cultural experiences, whether to cater to local and foreign tourists or the local population. This is perhaps partly because it has only relatively recently come to wider public, and therefore state, attention. An article in a local Kedah-based newspaper, *Warta Darulaman*, discussed a cultural workshop held in 1988 to study and identify Kedah's local cultural identity, which mentioned but sidelined *Mek Mulung*. It was held on Gunung Jerai, about 50 kilometres south of Alor Setar, the capital of Kedah (*Wartawan Kita*, 1988). 150 participants consisting of university scholars and state civil servants engaged in a discussion on building and improving Kedah culture. In the theatre section, several traditional forms were identified that the state wished to pursue towards improving the local performing arts scene. It was decided that a State Theatre Council (*Majlis Teater Negeri*) would be established to organize events like workshops and seminars to discuss problems facing local Kedah theatre. As an outcome to the workshop, it was agreed that performances such as *Wayang Kulit*, *Selampit*, and *Bangsawan* should be promoted as key parts of Kedah cultural identity. There was no attempt to promote *Mek Mulung* and *Mak Yong* (written *Pek Yong* in the article); instead, it was proposed that further discussions needed to take place to decide whether they should be a part of the Kedah cultural identity at all. *Menora*, on the other hand, was totally rejected as not belonging to Kedah cultural identity.

The decision to exclude *Menora* from the list was based on the idea that it does not contain Islamic values, and at the same time it contains un-Islamic properties. There



were no reasons given as to the ambiguous status of *Mek Mulung* and *Mak Yong*. However, it is clear that anything containing supernatural elements or those that might be deemed un-Islamic would have difficulty getting identified as important state heritage. This same issue has heavily affected the status of *Mak Yong* in Kelantan, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Although there is no ban on *Mek Mulung*, its ritual attributes are currently not fully supported within the village. This could be yet another “push” factor behind the growing preference for the concertized version as the only *Mek Mulung* identity that should be remembered—the aggressive national tour and activities promoting the concertized version thus might suit the state’s moral agenda. *Menora* has, however, recently received acknowledgement by Kedah state and the JKKN Kedah staged a *Menora* performance on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2017.

State actions and decisions made in the 1980s were driven by the National Cultural Policy established in 1971, after the National Cultural Congress<sup>110</sup> meetings two years earlier (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2014; Mohd Anis, 2009). The National Cultural Policy 1971 has three main principles, the third of which states that “Islam would be a crucial component of the National Culture” (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2014, p. 198).<sup>111</sup> This principle represents a threat to para-Islamic traditions with important ritual elements like *Mek Mulung* and *Mak Yong*, in which national and traditional values are not aligned as determined by the National Cultural Policy. Performances that incorporate spiritual elements have to be “cleansed” or erased<sup>112</sup> of undesirable elements before garnering state support, which can

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<sup>110</sup> The National Cultural Policy was drawn up to improve cultural relations and harmony among various ethnic groups in the country following the 1969 race riots. The Policy aims to improve tolerance and understanding towards the different cultures in the country.

<sup>111</sup> The other two are: The National Cultural Policy of Malaysia (1) should be based on the indigenous culture of the people of this region; and (2) suitable and salient elements of other cultures may be accepted and made an element of national culture (Mandal, 2008, p. 278).

<sup>112</sup> This happens to apply only to the Muslim performers. A Kelantan *Wayang Kulit* practitioner by the name of Pak Cu Eyo, who is an ethnic Chinese, could freely perform rituals and stories that are prohibited by the state. Pak Cu’s daughter, Eyo Leng Yan who is now the Deputy Director-General at the National Museum Malaysia has written a thesis about multi-cultural performing arts in Kelantan. (Personal communication with Eyo Leng Yan, 2014).

be some of the most important and characteristic parts of the tradition. Similar challenges can be observed in the case of Korean shamanism (Maliangkay, 2014) and the suppression of ancestral religion in Papua New Guinea with the rise of Christianity (Niles, 2017). Aesthetics and meanings of the performance are disconnected from their communities of origin, and as the transition proceeds from one generation to the next, much of the previous knowledge are lost due to transformations wrought by state mandates and censorship.

While *Mak Yong* has been banned in its home state of Kelantan, as mentioned previously, *Wayang Kulit*, a shadow puppet genre also largely performed in Kelantan, was given approval, but with strict guidelines as to the manner it may be presented to the public (Ab Aziz & Raja Iskandar, 2011; Brennan, 2001).

These are just some of the predicaments faced by some Malay cultural practices that have been part of local traditions for centuries. At the National Cultural Congress that convened on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2017, the government's advisor on social-cultural affairs (*Penasihat Sosiobudaya Kerajaan Malaysia*) presented eleven resolutions. The National Cultural Congress was held to review current cultural policy, suggesting that an updated and revised cultural policy will be presented in the next few years. Among the resolutions presented in April 2017, is the main concern to develop Malaysia into a "high-culture" nation in line with the government's aspirations towards TN50 (the terminology referring to the mission and vision towards national transformation translated as *Transformasi Nasional 2050*). It is possible that the appropriated and sanitized versions of traditional performing arts may be part of the agenda to create high culture that may even be acknowledged as a product for export outside of Malaysia.

From the legal perspective, a federal law was passed in 2005 to provide direction towards implementing the safeguarding of national heritage. Prior to this, efforts toward

safeguarding intangible cultural heritage did not have legal protection or importance. An existing law, the *Akta Benda Purba* 1976, makes special reference to the protection of old archaeological and religious relics. In recent years, there have been global discussions regarding safety measures relating to national heritage (UNESCO, 1972; Yusaidi, Hanapi & Ab Samad, 2011) with the participation of many nations providing various action plans to encourage heritage and preservation activities. Malaysia's response to this growing interest towards heritage was the establishment of the National Heritage Department in 2005 which became a separate entity from the Museum Department (Norliza & Khoo, 2009; Yusaidi, Hanapi, & Ab Samad, 2011). It was in this year also that the National Heritage Act 2005 (*Akta Warisan Kebangsaan 2005*) was implemented, thus replacing the *Akta Benda Purba* 1976 (*Undang-undang Malaysia*, 2006).

According to the National Heritage Act 2005, the newly established National Heritage Department has the responsibility to identify cultural heritage objects to be included in the Heritage List. A major issue is to ensure that positive steps are taken so that the listed heritage objects are safeguarded, and to maintain their sustainability. The list of heritage objects should not only be viable but also have positive impact on the local communities as well as the nation as a whole. This is probably the most important role to be undertaken by the Department, rather than organizing events in conjunction with presentation of awards as a token of acknowledgement for involvement in various aspects of heritage activities. Undertaking efforts towards maintaining long-term sustainability through on-site activism, as well as continuous research and documentation, are important considerations.

A more recent development within the performing arts scene has been the establishment of CENDANA (Cultural Economy Development Agency) in June 2017, an

organization set up by the Malaysian government “to build a vibrant, sustainable and ambitious cultural economy for Malaysia” (CENDANA, 2017, p. 1). It seeks to improve the cultural and creative economy by channelling private corporate investments to performing arts sectors across the nation. Experts on cultural and creative industries will be involved to identify and explore various creative arts industries and to make available appropriate funding towards targeted groups concentrating in areas within the Klang Valley<sup>113</sup>. Through CENDANA, local talents are identified and connected with the right investors, and appropriate strategies are developed to improve arts and culture with the objective of creating a dynamic cultural economy. One of the main goals of the cultivation of cultural activities is to generate and support the economic growth of the nation through creating a wider range of job markets. Hence, as an economic enterprise, CENDANA is a vehicle whereby urban concertized performances of various local traditions may provide a form of cultural tourism for foreign and national tourists as well as local audiences.

In response to the recent tabling of the Malaysia’s National Budget for 2018 in October 2017, CENDANA quoted on their website a statement which was included in the 2018 National Budget regarding an additional allocation to CENDANA (2017):

which amplifies the Government of Malaysia’s efforts in further promoting the growth of the cultural economy beyond Klang Valley, thus maximizing the country’s economic potential via arts and culture in addition to rehabilitating and nurturing the soul of the nation. (p. 1)

The government’s increased financial allocation towards arts and culture definitely sends a positive message to various local artists and arts practitioners. There is no specific mention of whether dying traditional arts in the rural areas can benefit from CENDANA’s

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<sup>113</sup> Klang Valley refers to five districts: (1) Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur; (2) Hulu Langat; (3) Gombak; (4) Klang; (5) Petaling, with a population of 7.2 million (2013) and land area totaling 2843km<sup>2</sup> (Abdullatif et al., 2017).

extra financial allocation. There is also the possibility that as urban reconstructed performances of various traditions gain national traction, their association with the village or rural form would become more distant, to the further detriment of the latter.

#### 4.5 Strategies for *Mek Mulung* Preservation

Since Pak Saad lost his eyesight in 2014, there have been questions as to who should take on the role of the *Mek Mulung* troupe leader in the village. This is an important decision for the group because this will determine the direction in which the village *Mek Mulung* will move with the new generation of practitioners (should there be a new generation). The chosen leader is the first contact for people from outside the village, and is responsible for keeping the group members together, training and rehearsing them, as well as taking responsibility for the ritual aspects of the tradition. I asked Pak Awie the last time he had performed *Mek Mulung* most; he answered my question by asking, “The most?” (While pointing towards Pak Saad’s son, Halim) ... during the days of his late grandfather ... his grandfather ... we performed the most during Pak Taib’s time”. When the late Pak Taib was the leader, the demand for *Mek Mulung* performances was at its height.<sup>114</sup> Current troupe members remember it as such an exciting time to have large audiences enjoying their performances, such that performers were willing to put on shows even with very little payment.

When considering the best way to support village *Mek Mulung*’s continuity, it is important to understand the issues and politics that are of concern to the village performers. An article by Pudentia (2010) on the revitalization of *Mak Yong* in the Malay world describes the struggles behind decisions, which involve negotiations with village

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<sup>114</sup> Interview with Pak Awie at his home on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2017.

performers to ensure that the group remains intact, and that the community are content with the decisions made by the performers, especially when those decisions involve money. Similarly, in the case of *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus, there have been occasions where certain performers, and not others, have been selected to perform certain shows or to represent the group. Being a collective, this has sometimes created tension among the *Mek Mulung* players, a consideration that is of no relevance, say, to the individual performer in the *Wayang Kulit* or *Awang Batil*. Understanding these tensions and the manner in which these tensions are overcome in village culture would be a crucial factor in stabilizing the performance ecosystem towards preserving the local meanings of the performance.

Activities to maintain sustainability of the *Mek Mulung* tradition within the community cannot meet with success without identifying the main factors leading to decreasing enthusiasm for the performance. As a performance which involves a collective effort from each of the performers, who have different perspectives and knowledge of the performance, the first thing to do is to ensure that the performers themselves are in agreement with and willingly commit to the sustainability initiatives. Only when this is achieved, can other methods towards accomplishing sustainability of the tradition be addressed.

UNESCO's initiative towards preserving intangible heritage has been used widely by Japan and Korea as their model in their preservation efforts, especially ensuring local laws are in place to contribute to sustainable conservation activities (Rees, 2016). Taking this lead, China is currently adopting and modifying the existing model to improve Chinese cultural heritage activities to revive traditions that were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. In order to execute rehabilitation activities, the Chinese government

recently established the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Centre.<sup>115</sup> Among the main tasks of the Centre is to identify and develop a list of cultural heritage experts. These experts are monitored by cultural officers to ensure that knowledge is passed down and actively translated into actions to be implemented within the intended communities.

The appointment of cultural experts who are acknowledged as “representative transmitters” or “living national treasures” is meaningless if these individuals are then not actively using and sharing their knowledge with members of the community. In order to ensure that these experts are living up to their titles, there should be top-down monitoring to ensure the tradition is actively passed down to the younger generation. In the case of the *Mek Mulung*, a clear transmission of knowledge to the next generation is a cause of concern. Pak Saad, who is acknowledged as the *Mek Mulung* expert, is ageing rapidly and is no longer able to perform or to teach like he used to. In Korea, a senior committee is responsible for ensuring those who are appointed as Human Culture Property would “teach, preserve, and perform the art or make the craft” (Howard, 2016a, p. 117). Therefore, to ensure that the cultural transmission process occurs with reference to *Mek Mulung*’s circumstances, perhaps it is wise to suggest the appointment of several “living national treasures” who are able to carry out these duties as representatives of *Mek Mulung*.

For countries like China, the federal government is directly involved in promoting experts as representative transmitters by acknowledging them officially and also providing them with monthly allowances. In addition, these individuals also receive

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<sup>115</sup> To “undertake specific work relating to the protection of the entire country’s intangible cultural heritage, to carry out policy consultation for intangible cultural heritage protection work; to organize surveys across the whole country; to guide the implementation of protection plans; to carry out theoretical research on intangible cultural heritage preservation; to organize scholarly, exhibition, performance, and public activities, and to engage in exchange, promotion and publicizing of the results and experiences of protection work; and to organize and implement the publication of research results and functions such as training of personnel (Luo Wei: 104)” (Rees, 2016; p. 28).

regional or provincial support to facilitate them in carrying out their responsibilities. Local provincial support is provided through numerous ways to take full advantage of the economic benefits which can be derived from tourism activities. Therefore, a more localized strategy is simultaneously carried out in addition to the support received from the central government. The provincial government takes pride in promoting local talent found in their community which projects their identity and highlights their wealth in culture as expressed through festivals and exhibitions, and thus helps to establish them on the cultural tourism map.

Following the 2014 declaration of *Mek Mulung* as the Kedah state heritage, state-level support for this performance form has been evident. During his speech at the declaration and book launch (as mentioned in section 4.2 in this Chapter), the Chief Minister assured that there will be efforts by the Kedah state government and various agencies to promote *Mek Mulung* at the state, national and international level. However, little follow-up has been observed in efforts to ensure the so-called cultural transmitters are actively carrying out their responsibilities; there has in fact been no visible state support to help the cultural transmitters in this crucial activity. The economic potential of *Mek Mulung* in the domain of cultural tourism can justify the state to invest in bringing foreign tourists as well as Malaysian residents into Wang Tepus to experience and be entertained by *Mek Mulung* in the traditional village context. The state can consider creating a market for tourism activities associated with the village lifestyle, such as homestay programs, which encourage interactions with the performers and members of the community, thus reflecting the true nature of the tradition in the past. When the community realizes that their culture is appreciated by those from the outside world,



perhaps it will lead to increased interest among the people in the village themselves to realize the importance of their culture.

It is probably difficult to reverse the decreasing level of importance attached to the *Mek Mulung* performance in the Wang Tepus community. Increased awareness of un-Islamic practices and greater adherence to expected Islamic values among the villagers, availability of and easier access to entertainment options, and convenient transportation facilities to the main city are among the factors that have negatively affected the *Mek Mulung* tradition. Today, knowledge about its continued existence is more and more confined to the performers themselves and their immediate families. The majority of the families within the community of Wang Tepus are related to each other; and therefore, have some sort of relationship with the performers. However, due to the high cost involved in the preparation for and the actual performance itself, as well as the growing tensions among the troupe members themselves, making *Mek Mulung* continue to be relevant to the Wang Tepus community seems to be a formidable task.

#### **4.6 *Mek Mulung* Heritage Beyond Malaysia**

Heritage is not restricted to enjoyment by those within the particular cultural space of its origin; indeed, it is generally promoted to those beyond its cultural boundaries as a tourist product. Heritage products, such as crafts and cultural shows, are now presented to the wider world to showcase the vibrant energy and wonderful talents which abound within any given society. Awareness, knowledge, and understanding about various aspects of the culture can be attained through a variety of media sources such as in the form of printed material or oral demonstrations. In Malaysia, the launching of CENDANA and the passing of the recent National Heritage Act both emphasize a new desire on the part of the

government for a new vision for culture and its promotion in the Malaysian context. Given the link with tourism, there is a great chance that performing arts and other artistic products will not remain for local market consumption only, but have great potential to be promoted and consumed by the wider global market. This will have knock-on effects for the aesthetics of *Mek Mulung* as it becomes a commodity to be sold in the international tourist and heritage market.

It is the concertized version of *Mek Mulung*, with its already urbanized aesthetic, that is presented to promote the form as a heritage and tourism product. This is particularly obvious in the case of the JKKN Kedah's *Mek Mulung* tour and the *Mek Mulung* performance during the 2016 ASEAN Culture and Tourism Fair held in Gwangju and Andong in South Korea. While these tours have put *Mek Mulung* on the international map, the creation of a new globalized aesthetic for *Mek Mulung* poses further possible risk towards the sustainability of the original Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*. It is unfortunate that increased recognition and appreciation have not benefited the Wang Tepus community, both in terms of the performers' well-being and the village conditions, nor in terms of incentives to promote the village version of the *Mek Mulung*.

#### **4.7 Conclusion: Construction of Heritage or Heritages for *Mek Mulung***

*Mek Mulung* has come a long way from the years when it was under-appreciated outside of its immediate village audiences and lacking in recognition by the state (Mohd Ibrahim, 1996; Wartawan Kita, 1988). Its concertized version now enjoys national levels of appreciation well beyond the village in festivals, exhibitions, and competitions. This has been enhanced considerably by its designation as "state heritage". The "convenient amnesia" that clouds its past as a performance unique to Wang Tepus village is nowhere

mentioned in current writings. From a performance form that in 1988 was almost not considered to be a Kedah tradition, it is now widely celebrated as iconic of Kedah culture and accorded state heritage status. Kedah now has a unique performance form that it claims is representative of Kedah culture; it is perhaps in the state's interest to forget that it is only associated with one small location in Kedah, and not as something traditionally practiced widely throughout the entire state.

The creation of the concertized *Mek Mulung* has left a lasting impression on the performing arts scene in Malaysia with possible implications for the traditional performance ecosystem nationwide. In my previous study, I argued that the concertization of *Mek Mulung* provides a complementary alternative, but does not replace the traditional version whereby the village performance co-exists with the concertized version, each having its speciality functions of ritual and entertainment, respectively. This consequence of a concurrent dual existence is described by Howard (2014) as a post-revival scenario where both the village and concertized performances are equally important to maintain relevancy of the *Mek Mulung* tradition. But in my most recent fieldwork (2018) it has become clearer that *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus is rapidly declining and the concertized *Mek Mulung* on urban stages are increasingly booming. This can be viewed as a situation which I would call an “antiparallel post-revival” situation where the two forms no longer complement each other, but rather move in opposite directions.

Considering the momentum created around concertized *Mek Mulung*, and its adoption by Kedah state as the official version of its heritage, it is very unlikely that the concertized form will show a decline in the near future. Its success makes it all the more important that its primary source, the original Wang Tepus version, is not allowed to slide into oblivion. An interesting parallel is Barley Norton's (2009) description of the

concertization of a traditional performance *len dong*, a Vietnamese spirit possession enactment, for presentation to tourists and foreign audiences. The reconstruction of the piece called the Three Spirits was created by two individuals from two different artistic institutions, who were themselves non-practitioners of the actual *len dong*. Using their special position in the institutions, they were able to persuade the local authorities to stage *len dong* and to have it recognized as a state culture. Following its success in France, Norton (2009) notes that, "... the Three Spirits, which plays on exotic notions of spirit possession and ritual, demonstrates the growing awareness among the directors of music and theatre troupes of the expectations of foreign audiences, as well as of the changing views about what constitutes Vietnamese identity" (p. 208).

The difference between the concertization of *len dong* and *Mek Mulung* is that, *len dong*'s debut performance was meant for foreign non-Vietnamese audience rather than the general Vietnamese population who are probably not familiar with *len dong*, and the absence of consultations with actual spirit mediums during the development process. On the other hand, the concertized *Mek Mulung* is aimed to provide entertainment for the general Malaysian population outside of Wang Tepus, veiling its ritual aspects, emphasizing its secular entertainment form, and involving the guidance of Wang Tepus practitioners during its initial conception and follow-up process. Another point to consider is that the *len dong* spirit mediums are respected members of the community, and the belief among new and aspiring mediums that becoming one brings honour to their families. Practitioners of *len dong* have strong community support and in great demand for their performances. Such a status is not associated with performers of *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus.

A greater intervention effort is needed to prevent the disappearance of the *Mek Mulung* village performances and their hereditary practitioners. This can only be achieved through community commitment to hold on to the tradition, almost certainly at this point through outside efforts to provide practical support to maintain it, and continue to ensure it maintains its rightful place within the cultural value system.

The greatest negative impact of the concertizing, modernization and urban popularity of *Mek Mulung* would be the loss of the village-based version's identity, if it becomes fully absorbed into the urban, concertized version. It will not be an issue if the village-based performance evolves within the confines of their village and modernizes to fit the current tastes of the village community. However, Pak Saad's daughter's school resorting to a YouTube video of the concertized version (Refer section 3.7 in Chapter Three) for ideas on staging a *Mek Mulung* performance when the tradition itself was close at hand suggests that this is not its current trajectory.

In a recent interview,<sup>116</sup> Zamzuriah asked Pak Saad what he thought about these other groups performing *Mek Mulung*. Pak Saad, as noted previously, said he was happy to collaborate with respectful professional performers in producing performances for the proscenium stage — he is not averse to contemporary movements. But he remarked, “Why should I mention about the other groups? What should I do? They play it their way... It is only called “*Mek Mulung*”. The music is wrong, everything they are doing is wrong, the drum patterns are wrong ...”.<sup>117</sup> This remark demonstrates that Pak Saad as a leading cultural bearer disapproves of the *Mek Mulung* performances done by other groups, when they are done without reference to the true traditions passed down within the village. These

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<sup>116</sup> Interview by Zamzuriah with Pak Saad, 18 March 2018. Transcription by the author.

<sup>117</sup> “(k)umpulan lain tuh...tak, cerita pun takpa, depa nak buat apa. Depa main cara depa...nama ja *Mek Mulung*. Lagu pun tak betoi, apa pun tak betoi, gendang pun depa pukoi tak betoi”. (Interview by Zamzuriah on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2018, transcription by the author).

groups perform under the name of *Mek Mulung*, but to Pak Saad, they do not reflect the identity nor respect the cultural values of *Mek Mulung*.

The Wang Tepus traditional performers further expressed their concerns about the JKKN Kedah's performance structure that they feel is increasingly moving away from *Mek Mulung*'s original structure. Their concerns were made known through a letter which was sent recently to the Director of the Kedah state JKKN on 10 October 2018.<sup>118</sup> The letter was duly signed by all members of the current *Mek Mulung* Wang Tepus troupe to request that JKKN conduct a review of their performance style and structure so as to reflect as close possible the true *Mek Mulung*. They acknowledged that they were happy with JKKN's efforts to actively promote *Mek Mulung*, but requested that a reevaluation and reeducation be conducted with the involvement of the Wang Tepus troupe so that the *Mek Mulung* style and performance characteristics are maintained. A question they put forward in the letter to JKKN is whether it can still continue to be called *Mek Mulung* if the performance no longer adheres to the *Mek Mulung* true performance structure.

The letter was not intended to discourage the Kedah state JKKN from continuing to stage *Mek Mulung* performances, but to acknowledge that as a leading government agency in promoting local culture to the general public, JKKN Kedah should portray a version of a *Mek Mulung* performance that is acceptable to the tradition bearers. The response from the Kedah state JKKN was positive and indicated that it was understood as a collaboration to restore the integrity of *Mek Mulung*'s heritage status and that the JKKN Kedah's *Mek Mulung* version is a valid point of reference for other troupes to follow.

I also noted previously (Nur Izzati, 2014) that the increased coverage of the concertized performances by the media and the extent to which they have been widely

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<sup>118</sup> Personal communication with an informant who requested identity to be kept anonymous.

accepted by audiences from different backgrounds, provides support to the argument for viewing the urban version as an invented tradition, as proposed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012). The changes in nuances and aesthetics in the performances enabled urban audiences to reconnect with their imagined traditional past and satisfy their feelings of nostalgia. With the rise of tourism and the urge to create more cultural products with export potential for global cultural markets, emerging heritage discussions have touched on meeting political needs (Howard, 2016c). Changes in values, importance, and ownership issues have to be considered in relation to how *Mek Mulung* is currently viewed. From the perspective of the *Mek Mulung* tradition as heritage, who is/are the heritage(s) to benefit? With reference to the two versions of *Mek Mulung*, would it be possible to have two different “heritages” to cater to the needs of each one? On the other hand, if only one heritage is the option, is it possible that one side’s cultural rights are violated when the choice has to be made?

There are perhaps no clear answers to these problems at this point. *Mek Mulung* already exists in two separate realms. One approach may be to understand how the *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus can benefit from the fame and publicity the urban *Mek Mulung* has enjoyed in recent years. This study already documents *Mek Mulung*’s development, and through an understanding of the shifting ecology as well as promoting activism within the Wang Tepus community, may help bring about greater engagement with issues of sustainability within the original community (Howard, 2012b; Schippers, 2016).

In promoting sustainability and engagement, projects developed by researcher activism using applied ethnomusicology concepts can contribute to increased importance of *Mek Mulung* among the younger generation by engaging them to conduct research on their own traditions. Tan notes that:

for any cultural development project to be sustainable, communities must be empowered and gain confidence to take action in order to make changes in their lives. There is also a need to democratize research and promote collaboration between the researcher and the community so that the latter is engaged and feels a sense of ownership in the entire process for change. For engagement and ownership to occur, participatory approaches for planning, training, research, mapping of issues, analysis, and presentation, drawn from ethnomusicology and other disciplines, such as developments studies, cultural and performance studies, applied anthropology, folklore studies, and oral history, need to be developed. (2015, p. 111)

In Tan's previous projects, such as the performance of *Kisah Pulau Pinang* in 2006, the traditional researcher role as participant-observer changes to educator and activist as a group of children were selected and taught to conduct research on Penang, and to present their findings in the form of a creative theatre performance. The main goal was to empower the children to be actively involved in the whole process and to guide them to produce the finished product. The target children now engage in active *musicking* (Small, 1998) which enables them to have a fuller experiential understanding of Penang's history and culture.

It has been demonstrated that researcher activism is one way to empower communities in regaining a sense of pride and importance of their tradition. Although it may not bring the full sense of *communitas* (Schechner, 2013) that previously the *Sembah Guru* had in the community of Wang Tepus, the active *Mek Mulung* revival can evolve within the community and for the community. Various platforms to encourage active engagement (which is discussed in Chapter Seven) can provide the community, especially the younger generation with a space which is safe and an environment which encourages ongoing learning of the *Mek Mulung* tradition. The role of the researcher is thus to assist the community in exploring various possibilities towards sustainability. Activism programs have yet to be implemented, and if successful can provide a model for other



declining traditions in the northern regions of Kedah and Perlis, such as the *Wayang Kulit Gedek* and the *Awang Batil*.

## Chapter 5

### Audience Responses to *Mek Mulung*

#### 5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have discussed the construction of the *Mek Mulung* performance through the lenses of the holders of the tradition and the perspectives of those associated with the creation of the concertized version. In this chapter, I intend to examine the responses of *Mek Mulung*'s audiences gathered from a variety of sources. Combining quantitative data and qualitative data, discussions include analyses of the organization of performance structures (Schechner, 2013). Also relevant to the analyses is Christopher Small's (1998) concept of "musicking" which encapsulates the relationship between performance, meaning, and process as well as how audiences interact and respond. Stephanie Pitts and Karen Burland's analytical framework also provides support; they explore:

the many facets of concert attendance—the venue, the decisions and rituals of ticket purchasing, the interaction with other audience members, the expectation of listener behavior, and the music 'itself', encompassing repertoire and performance [as well as] fresh evidence for how these elements are experienced and understood by concert-goers. (2016, p. 1)

The potential sustainability of *Mek Mulung*'s various versions may be extrapolated from information on audiences' preconceived knowledge and their motivations to continue to support the performance, as proposed by Mulvey's (2001) concept of the audience's multiple gazes.

## **5.2 Audience Data**

Data for audience responses were gathered from different groups and through a variety of data collection methods. Refer section 1.7 in Chapter One for detailed description of audience data.

(1) A questionnaire was developed to gather responses from two groups of audiences who attended a performance by students of Universiti Malaya on two different nights.

(2) Audience responses through interviews were gathered from a group who attended the final PPAG performance at the Dewan Bandaraya, Kuala Lumpur and a three-date performance by Darinai Dance Company at Malaysia Tourism Center.

(3) Retrospective audience responses from selected villagers from the Wang Tepus community.

(4) Published responses in the form of audience reviews/critiques in the printed media.

(5) Online responses from virtual audiences towards recorded *Mek Mulung* performances available on video-sharing websites.

### **5.2.1 PPAG's 2011 Production of *Cahaya Bulan***

The PPAG performed their last *Mek Mulung* performance, *Cahaya Bulan*, in 2011 at the Auditorium Dewan Bandaraya in Kuala Lumpur (Kuala Lumpur City Hall Auditorium) which is about three kilometers away from their usual home venue at the Kuala Lumpur City Centre Twin Towers. Audience responses during this performance was part of the interview data that I collected for my Master's thesis (Nur Izzati, 2014). Members of the audience who attended the last staging of the three-night performance

were randomly approached for participation in interviews conducted before the performance began. Instead of being individually interviewed, respondents gave their individual responses to interviews conducted as a group. In addition to responding "Yes" or "No" to a set of structured interview questions, some interviewees gave extra information which provided important background for my doctoral research. Fifteen respondents, between the ages of 26 to 45 years, provided the interview data focusing on their motivation for attending the performance.

A significant number of these respondents had some prior knowledge of what to expect of the performance. Two of them were former PPAG dancers who had been following the troupe for many years. Another respondent, I later discovered, was a dance tutor for Zamzuriah's *Mek Mulung* class at ASWARA. Only four respondents had not previously heard of nor watched *Mek Mulung* prior to this performance; rather the majority reported having some degree of exposure to the form and were very convinced that they would enjoy the performance. They also indicated their enthusiasm for other forms of theatre performances, and supplemented their knowledge of the *Mek Mulung* form from various kinds of media and through personal contacts (Nur Izzati, 2014).

PPAG's long-standing reputation as a reliable provider of entertainment was one of the main assurances to these respondents that they would enjoy the performance. Most of them indicated that they would look forward to another *Mek Mulung* performance. During this particular performance, two local television personalities were invited to perform as part of the cast. It was not a common practice for PPAG to include celebrities in their *Mek Mulung* performances, such as those previously staged in 2002, 2007 and 2010. In the 2011 circumstances, the producer's rationale was that celebrities would attract more first-time audiences ('Nabil, Razali penyeri', 2011). However, my respondents

revealed that the celebrities' participation as cast members did not impact their decision to watch the performance. Their main reason for watching the performance was for their own enjoyment, knowing from past experience that PPAG would likely provide it.

Most of the respondents did not come alone, but were accompanied by at least one other person, with the majority coming in groups of about four persons consisting of family members. One particular respondent who had come earlier to watch on the first night with a group of friends, decided to come again to watch the last show, but this time bringing his whole family. It seems that *Mek Mulung* performances by this point were gaining a reputation as suitable entertainment for the whole family, for audiences from different generations. This "family" reputation may have contributed to its entry into tertiary and secondary classrooms. The same respondent also expressed his strong support for the *Mek Mulung* tradition, that even had he received free tickets to a different show elsewhere, it would not distract him from bringing his family to this *Mek Mulung* performance.

### **5.2.2 Universiti Malaya's 2016 Production of *Dewa Kaca***

*Mek Mulung Dewa Kaca* was performed at the Experimental Theater on the Universiti Malaya campus on two consecutive nights, 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> December 2016. The show was staged by Universiti Malaya students who were enrolled in a drama course. Tickets were sold to the public at an affordable price of RM10 per admission. In addition to banners and flyers, and the Universiti Malaya website, the event was also promoted nationally through mainstream media. I was part of the ensemble who performed for a

special appearance on the national television's early morning broadcast of the talk show *Selamat Pagi Malaysia* (Good Morning Malaysia).<sup>119</sup>

Upon obtaining approval from the Head of the University's Drama Department, questionnaires were distributed to random audience members before the performance and collected at the end of the performance on both nights. The questionnaire is presented in Appendix C. Among the questions asked are a number of them are designed to provide an understanding of audiences' reasons and motivations for attending the performances.

Audience participation in the survey was voluntary. Being a purposive sample, responses from this audience fit the theoretical generalization (Mitchell, 1983; Seale, 2018) that proposes that the respondents are "chosen not because they represent some wider population, but because they exhibit features which help develop insight into social processes that are likely to help us understand the behavior of other groups"—in this case, other urban audiences for *Mek Mulung* (Seale, 2018, p. 166). A possible limitation of the volunteer sample is that those who did not volunteer might have different experiences and insights than those who did volunteer. A total of 71 questionnaires were returned on the first night and 89 questionnaires on the second night.

Of the 160 respondents who attended the performance over the two nights, 46.9 percent identified as male and 53.1 percent female, with 90.6 percent of whom were ethnic Malays. The performance was held in the Experimental Theatre on the university campus, and the student performers were undergraduates enrolled in the performing arts course, thus explains the high percentage (70 percent) of the respondents who were students. This may also explain the fact that the majority (87.5 percent) of the respondents were 30 years of age and younger.

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<sup>119</sup> Recording of promotion of *Mek Mulung* performance through special appearance on national television. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=utgekMRoe9USPM>. (Accessed on 14 May 2019)

In terms of their exposure to *Mek Mulung*, 75 percent of the respondents said that this was their first time watching a *Mek Mulung* performance. Among those who had been exposed to *Mek Mulung* before this, 70 percent had watched it performed in Kuala Lumpur by other groups and 20 percent by the same group. Among those who had heard previously about *Mek Mulung* (65 percent), 39.4 percent indicated having heard about it through lectures, classes, seminars or talks, and 22.1 percent through print media. Nonetheless, only 39.4 percent of all the respondents knew that *Mek Mulung* originated from Kedah.

The three main sources of information about the performance were recommendations of friends and family (57.1 percent), through the internet (17.5 percent), and from banners or flyers (12.4 percent). More than one-third of the respondents indicated *Mek Mulung* performance was something new to them and they were motivated to watch the performance out of curiosity (35.6 percent), 24.9 percent because someone they knew recommended it to them, and 18.1 percent to give support to a friend or family member who was performing. Performing students also received complimentary tickets as incentives to bring friends and family to the performance. However, only a small number of audience members said they came because the tickets were free (2.8 percent). In terms of their expectations of the performance, 24.4 percent expected to enjoy the show while 58.8 percent was hoping that it would be worth the money spent for the tickets. Tickets charged for the performance was very affordable at RM10 per admission. As for cost of ticket for a *Mek Mulung* performance, more than two-thirds of the respondents were willing to pay RM25 and less (66.3 percent) and 24.4 percent were willing to pay RM26 – RM40. Less than 10 percent were willing to pay more than RM40 for a *Mek Mulung* show.

Post-performance responses by the audience show that 75.6 percent of them enjoyed the performance, while 21.9 percent of them felt that it was average. Of the total 160 respondents, only two stated that they did not understand the performance. The majority of the audience gave positive reviews, with 78.8 percent of them indicating that they would come again to watch a *Mek Mulung* performance. The rest (20 percent) were not sure if they would come again to watch a *Mek Mulung* performance; but two respondents were certain that they would not come again.

In terms of the origins of *Mek Mulung*, 60.6 percent did not know that it originated from the village of Wang Tepus in Kedah, thus suggesting that the level of audience prior knowledge about the form was limited. This contrasts with the two-thirds of respondents who had indicated they had heard of or knew about *Mek Mulung* before this performance. This suggests most of the latter had previously been exposed only to the concertized version. It would be very interesting to pursue the question of audiences' specific knowledge about *Mek Mulung* further in future research.

### **5.2.3 Darinai Dance 2018 Production of *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik***

*Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik*, a Darinai Dance production, was staged at the Malaysian Tourism Centre (MaTiC), Kuala Lumpur on 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> August 2018. Auditions for the cast were held in May, followed by workshops in early July. The cast was a mix of professional performers and university performing arts students. Among the cast, I could recognize several students who had performed in the Universiti Malaya production *Mek Mulung Dewa Kaca* in 2016, and also students who had performed at ASWARA. The cast was also multi-racial (a Chinese, an Indian, and several from ethnic groups from Sabah and Sarawak) although most of the performers were Malays. I was



fortunate to be present during the rehearsals for this production from 6<sup>th</sup> August until the day of the performance.

The performance at MaTiC was held at the Tunku Abdul Rahman Hall which can accommodate up to 400 audience members. The stage was smaller with a lower ceiling in comparison with the Universiti Malaya Experimental Theatre. However, *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik* had a bigger cast and wider media promotion. The stage was set up to reflect the *bangsal* in the village. During the three nights of the performance, Zamzuriah as the director decided that certain performers would exchange roles among themselves, with the rationale that it would enable each of the performers to get a chance to try different roles. At the opening night, specially invited guests included the JKKN director-general Tan Sri Norliza Rofli.

On the opening night, I was part of the audience and approached most of my informants before the performance started. The foyer area where the audience gathered was relatively small, so it was easy for me to move from one respondent to another. I introduced myself to the respondents as a graduate student studying *Mek Mulung*. All those approached willingly gave their cooperation, with some of them even offering to talk more about the performance than simply answering my questions. Data collection in this case was largely in the form of casual conversations focusing on audience members' motivations to attend the performance. Most of them came to the performance in groups of two or more. With the exception of one respondent who was from Kedah, the state up north, the rest were residents of areas of central peninsula Malaysia close to Kuala Lumpur.

During the performances on the following two nights, I was not able to make contacts with as many audience members, because I was requested to perform on stage to

replace a musician who had to withdraw from the performance to attend to a death in the family. I was not prepared to perform, but I felt confident enough to perform on stage with little prior notice and practice. It was fortunate that I had regularly played with the music ensemble during my presence at ASWARA for two semesters. In addition to that, I also conducted observations during several rehearsal sessions leading to the actual performance. However, my stage experience during the two nights' performances prevented me from making contacts with more audience members. Many had left the hall before I could leave the stage after the final curtain call. Altogether, I managed to get responses from eighteen, fifteen, and eleven respondents, on the first, second, and third night, respectively.

There was an almost balanced representation of male and female respondents, and a mix of age groups. There were groups of young families with primary-school-age children as well as senior citizens. Half of my respondents (nine of eighteen) on the first night's performance had never heard of *Mek Mulung* before, and this was the first time they were watching it. One Chinese respondent in his late thirties said that he was part of a tour-guide training program, and was waiting for his group of friends and leader/'instructor' to arrive. It was the leader/instructor who had recommended that the group join him to watch the performance. Despite working in the tourist industry, he had never heard about *Mek Mulung* before the performance. His response after the performance was that it was a good performance and he understood most of the content.

Six of my respondents on the first day, or one-third, came to show support to a particular performer. An elderly man together with a younger woman in her twenties, both originally from Kelantan but currently residing in Kuala Lumpur, told me that they came specially to watch the celebrity-performer Asmidar. They had never seen a *Mek Mulung*

performance before this one. Some former Universiti Malaya students came to give support to the Universiti Malaya students who were performing. One of them had performed in the 2016 Universiti Malaya production as the *Raja* character. He felt that this performance was better than the one that he had performed earlier, since it had more professional and seasoned performers in the cast.

I had the privilege of attending the performance for the three nights and gaining feedback from respondents before and after the show. One male respondent whom I had met before the performance on the first night, mentioned that he had some knowledge about *Mek Mulung* and that it originated from Wang Tepus. He showed a keen interest in traditional performances and noted that he works nearby. When I met him again after the performance, he mentioned that the performance was good, but he could not understand the songs nor the jokes made by one particular actor. On the same night, a pair of sisters also commented that they thought the show was great; however, they could not understand the song texts at all<sup>120</sup>. On the final night, a group of six also agreed that the text was hard to understand. One middle-aged lady gave a response on the second night that she came with no expectations and had never seen a *Mek Mulung* performance before. When I asked her how she felt about the performance, the answer she gave was, “oooh, so this is *Mek Mulung*”<sup>121</sup>. With no prior understanding about the performance, she concluded that what she saw that night was *Mek Mulung*. She had no knowledge of the journey from the performance in Wang Tepus to the urban staged version, and accepted the latter as *the Mek Mulung*.

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<sup>120</sup> The words that they used were “*lagu tak paham langsung*” or “*tak paham apa*” (“cannot understand the songs at all”) or (“do not understand anything”).

<sup>121</sup> In her words “*oooh, macam ni ke Mek Mulung*”.

A few respondents indicated they were searching specifically for traditional performances to attend. One husband and wife couple on the first night mentioned that they had searched the internet for performances that they could watch on the weekend. They had attended the performance at Universiti Malaya in the past, and through an internet search they found that there was a *Mek Mulung* performance on the weekend. They mentioned that an additional attraction for them was that the tickets were reasonably priced. Another informant on the second night who came with four siblings also found out about the performance through an internet search. She had initially searched the JKKN website looking for a *Mak Yong* show but found a *Mek Mulung* staging on the dates that were convenient to them.

Amongst the respondents, only one stated he was from Kedah and he admitted not having seen *Mek Mulung* performances before. The male Malay respondent was accompanied by another female colleague who was previously a Universiti Malaya theatre graduate. The team was joined by another male friend who was late and came in the middle of the show and subsequently bought another ticket for the next day so he could see the full performance show. After the performance, the respondent who was from Kedah expressed how much he liked the show. Speaking in English, he excitedly said, “I felt goosebumps! I could feel the ‘*roh*’!”. The term *roh* in this context refers to experiencing the presence of a spirit which the respondent could easily relate from his Kedah background and the use of a familiar dialect in the dialogues.

#### **5.2.4 Wang Tepus Villagers as Audience: Retrospective Views**

The perspectives of the Wang Tepus village community, both performers and village audiences, towards their own *Mek Mulung* tradition provide an understanding of

the evolution of their acceptance or rejection towards it up to the present time. My inquiries are retrospective because there were no performances in the village after 2014; thus, audience views were based on their experiences with performances held earlier than that. Nonetheless, these retrospective views are important for understanding villagers' current perspectives as long-standing audiences of the tradition.

Interviews with village performers were conducted as group sessions<sup>122</sup> together with several family members, usually wives and children, as well as friends and acquaintances. Throughout the interview sessions, those present were free to express their ideas and opinions among themselves. This was helpful in providing support or debunking issues and comments made by the performers from their perspectives as audiences towards *Mek Mulung* performances. In addition, informal interviews with random villagers that I met during my walks within the village provided valuable information to enable me to evaluate some of the facts given by the performers.

Interview responses with family members of the performers confirm that *Mek Mulung* performances were an essential event in the village that served to gather villagers from different areas in the vicinity at one place for a convivial occasion. The positive, lively emotions of such social events is best described through responses to questions about what my respondents liked about the performance: "It was more exciting back in the old days. There were many people"<sup>123</sup> (*Zaman dulu ramai, zaman dulu*) or regarding performing at weddings: "Weddings were very lively" (*Meriah kenduri kahwin*). Conversations with the performers gave the impression that the excitement of the *Mek*

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<sup>122</sup> It is religiously impermissible and punishable by law in Malaysia to be in an enclosed space with someone of the opposite sex without a third person present. Islamic law in Malaysia differs from state to state (Peletz, 2002). Therefore, it is very common to have several people (usually family members) continuously watching while I was conducting my interviews in a informant's home, except for few brief periods. The outcome of these situations was they became more of discussions rather than interviews, whereby other family members offered their views which in many cases helped to verify certain events.

<sup>123</sup> Recorded interview by Zamzuriah in 2009 with Pak Leh. Transcription by the author.

*Mulung* experience was not primarily from watching the performance. Of more significance was the preparation involved in various aspects of putting on the performance. The whole preparation and performance process served as the highlight of community celebration. Those not directly involved in helping to put on the performance, could involve themselves in related business activities, selling food and other items for extra income. Others were directly involved in making preparation for the ritual process, such as preparing for the feast; these events called for their expertise and special talents. All in all, holding these performances gave the villagers a reason to get together and socialize among themselves.<sup>124</sup>

With regard to their views about the performance itself, many informants suggested that the quality of acting had deteriorated significantly throughout the generations. One of them mentioned particularly that it is the *Awang*'s funny antics/banters that is usually the highlight of the show. The *Awang* continuously mocks the *Raja* and makes jokes that provoke the *Raja*'s anger to whip him with his *rotan bera*i. Wang Tepus audience members found these humorous episodes very entertaining, something also pointed out by Saad (1975) over thirty years earlier. But in the current situation, the dialogues between the *Awang* and the *Raja* have been significantly reduced, and the *Raja* usually whips the *Awang* lightly. Pak Saad also mentions that skills required of performers playing the role of *Awang* and the *Raja* have almost disappeared.<sup>125</sup>

Community responses regarding the reception of *Mek Mulung* today are very variable, and the younger generations tend towards lukewarm or indifferent. A villager whom I interviewed on the street said she knew the *Mek Mulung* tradition and had seen it

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<sup>124</sup> Wedding celebrations and other festivities in Wang Tepus still rely on members of the community to help prepare food (*rewang*), a practice that remains active in rural areas. In city or urban areas, catering services have replaced the *rewang* practice.

<sup>125</sup> Interview by Zamzuriah with Pak Saad, 2009. Transcription by the author.

performed at various times throughout her life. She would come over to help out with the preparation and stay to watch the performance for a short while before going home. She also revealed that she is distantly related to Pak Saad the *Mek Mulung* troupe leader. However, a teenage informant who resides a few meters away from where Pak Awie (a *Mek Mulung* performer) lives knew very little about *Mek Mulung*. She proceeded to ask her much older sister for some insight into the subject, but the sister also had little notion of what *Mek Mulung* was.<sup>126</sup> I conveyed this situation to Pak Saad's family members who expressed their disbelief and disappointment that there could be people within their community who were not aware such a tradition exists. In further discussions, it was suggested that it was possible there were people from within the village who did not participate in the performance or did not grow up in the village. With fewer regular *Mek Mulung* performances in the village, there is less likelihood that newcomers to the village would encounter the tradition, or discuss it with members of the village community with sufficient awareness, knowledge, and understanding of *Mek Mulung*.

I followed up with similar casual interviews with villagers in Wang Tepus<sup>127</sup> about a year later. One female respondent recalled having attended a performance sometime in the 1990s, but was “just not interested” (“*tak minat*”) to follow the annual performance. Another couple quickly dismissed me and, instead, offered directions to Pak Saad’s house to seek more information. They claimed they did not know much about *Mek Mulung*, but their swift response indicated otherwise, from the fact that they knew who Pak Saad is and where he lives. The most interesting response I got during this visit was from a respondent whose house has a window overlooking the *bangsal*. She claimed to be indifferent towards

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<sup>126</sup> Conversations with these individuals took place on 9 June 2017 in the vicinity of Kampung Wang Tepus and at neighboring Kampung Keda.

<sup>127</sup> The interviews took place on the 9 August 2018 with four informants within Kampung Wang Tepus.

the performance, also saying “*tak minat*”; but yet commented that she had not seen or heard anyone performing in the *bangsal* for a long time. Although these informants appeared to show no signs of interest or enthusiasm towards the performance, none of them actually indicated hostility or resistance to others who might be interested. Such reactions from respondents who preferred to be non-committal in their responses about *Mek Mulung* is a reflection of what Scott (1985) discovered among Kedah rural folks who refrain from making any individual judgments but have the tendency to give personal opinions which are aligned with the larger group. I would further speculate that the reluctance shown by these respondents to proceed further with discussions on *Mek Mulung* is that they did not want to be seen as having any association with it. It was important for the villagers to portray themselves as good Muslims who should not condone or participate in practices which are considered against Islamic teachings. Marie-Andree Couillard who was in Wang Tepus in the 1980s conveyed similar circumstances while conducting her research whereby she was not allowed to publish certain aspects of her field experiences, for example her observation of villagers conducting rituals during birthing practices.<sup>128</sup> According to Rahmah (1979) with increased awareness of Islamic dogma, *Mek Mulung* is in a dilemma to stay current, because “the teaching of Islam may not favor these performances” (p. 45). From my conversations with Pak Saad and his family, I deduce that these indifferent responses were from those having no direct relationship with the *Mek Mulung* tradition. Those directly associated with the *Mek Mulung* tradition would not be hesitant in giving their opinions about *Mek Mulung*, as they believe in what they are doing.

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<sup>128</sup> Personal communication through e-mail, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2018.



Other informants described how the *Mek Mulung* performance had a very significant impact on the lives of certain people who became very attached to those associated with *Mek Mulung* and Wang Tepus. Having migrated out of Wang Tepus, many former residents would return to their village to attend a *Mek Mulung* performance once they got news that a performance would take place. During one of my visits to Wang Tepus in 2011, I encountered an informant who used to watch *Mek Mulung* performances regularly, but had migrated out of the village. He felt he was fortunate to be able to come back to witness a performance. He had received the impression from his relatives that *Mek Mulung* was no longer performed: as he said “I thought they didn’t perform this anymore. I’m very grateful that I was able to catch the performance in time”.<sup>129</sup> It seems that some sense of *Mek Mulung*’s previous significance to the village and also awareness of its current declining levels of importance is retained by members of the village community and those who have left.

#### **5.2.5 Print Media Reviews and Critiques as Audience**

Print media such as newspaper reviews and articles provide secondary opinions regarding the reception of *Mek Mulung* in its concertized version from the pens of media personalities and journalists. While in-house newspaper editors have a tendency to generate positively-biased reviews of a performance, arts critics’ articles tend to adopt a stronger, more critical approach. Debate in the print and online media has been a healthy feature keeping dialogue about *Mek Mulung* constantly active. Most of the existing performance reviews are based on more recent performances, such as the PPAG’s final performance, and the performance resulting from the collaboration of AKRAB and JKKN

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<sup>129</sup> Conversation took place on the day of the *Sembah Guru* on 18 July 2011.

Kedah. However, several articles published in 2008 and earlier offer some insights into the earlier performances at Kampung Wang Tepus and throughout the period which culminated with the launching of the *Mek Mulung* book. In this section, I discuss these reviews considering these writers as audiences of a kind and evaluating how their input may shape how readers reinterpret their experiences as audiences of the live performance.

One of the earliest reviews of the village *Mek Mulung* troupe performing outside of their traditional Wang Tepus base was written in 1996. It was performed at Dewan Budaya in the state capital, Alor Setar. Appropriately titled “A cool response to rare performance of *Mek Mulung*”, Mohd Ibrahim (1996) noted in particular that a large number of the audience had difficulty understanding the performance because of its use of the Kedah dialect. The author wrote, “(t)he audience, mainly made up of students of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia who were doing a study on *Mek Mulung*, did not respond with much enthusiasm for they obviously could not follow the story.”<sup>130</sup> He further commented that, “even the banter of the two *peran* (the clown servants) who donned comical masks—which never fails to draw peals of laughter when staged in its native Kampung Wang Tepus—failed to evoke a smile among those of the audience.” The author observed that the traditional *Mek Mulung* performance did not engage the new audiences as it did audiences comprising of Wang Tepus villagers. Outside writers during the 1970s had expressed similar sentiments (Jusoh, 1971; Saad, 1975), whereas inside audiences in Wang Tepus responded positively.

In another article referring to the same 1996 performance, a research officer from the Kedah State Department of Arts mentioned that even at that time it was difficult to

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<sup>130</sup> The students were from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia located in Bangi, Selangor about 400 kilometers away in the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. These students were more likely to comprise of varied backgrounds in terms ethnicity, language, and socioeconomic status.

promote the performance within the kampung itself; he argued this was because the younger generation did not want to be associated with a performance in which the troupe members were involved in animistic traditions (Zuhri, 1996). These early reviews confirm that it was only through concertization and repackaging of the performance, that *Mek Mulung* became much more appreciated by audiences outside of Wang Tepus.

The reviews of the PPAG's performances were generally positive with writers complimenting the performance as "enjoyable" (Aref, 2007) or giving generic headlines like *Mek Mulung* was "well received" (*Mendapat sambutan*) (Amirul, 2012). In response to AKRAB's performance, the Director of the Kedah State JKKN remarked that its large audience turn-out indicated a positive sign of support from the audience (Samsudin, 2009). The same conclusion was drawn in a review in *Harian Metro* of the PPAG's 2011 performance (Siti Ruqayah, 2011). Most of these media reports focused on the plot of the performance without expressing views on the music, dance, or acting aspects.

Critics, on the other hand, gave more nuanced responses. One critique of PPAG's performance in a Malaysian magazine, *Pentas*, reported the writer's view that the *Mek Mulung* performance was well received by the audience, even though competing for audience share with a musical being staged at the more prestigious Istana Budaya about five kilometers away (Suhaimi, 2008). The reviewer opined that the performance captivated the audience with its casual conversational dialogue in daily Kedah dialect mixed with other "rojak" (a Malaysian fruit salad, usually to describe a mixture of things) local ideas. He was less complimentary about the music, which was increased in tempo as the directors felt it would help maintain the performance pace without losing audience interest. However, he acknowledged that it was a challenge for producers to keep traditional performances like *Mek Mulung* fresh so as to attract new audiences. Interviews

with producers in other outlets showed critics were aware that many contemporary elements had been incorporated into what is considered a traditional performance (Samsudin, 2009; Esme, 2010; Chua, 2010).

As an effort to continue the PPAG's legacy and to keep *Mek Mulung* alive, the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture commissioned the staging of a large scale *Mek Mulung* performance at Istana Budaya in 2015. It was presented as a Royal Gala performance, whereby the then King of Malaysia, who was also the Sultan of Kedah,<sup>131</sup> attended the performance. A newspaper review reported that more popular celebrities participated as cast members in this production. This production included multiple set changes with large props and a significantly large cast. The performance was covered by various newspapers (Zubir, 2015; Fan, 2015; Bibi Nurshuhada, 2015; Syarrizuan, 2015), including a review by a Universiti Sains Malaysia theatre professor Mohd Ghouse Nasruddin (2015) in the New Sunday Times. Mohd Ghouse felt that the performance's tradition was distorted by its grandiose and spectacular display of opulence, which did not reflect its essence as a folk performance. He did not feel that this was a good way to preserve *Mek Mulung* and keep it distinctive from other music-theatrical forms, describing the performance as a "mutation of a pseudo *Bangsawan* [a modern syncretic proscenium performance introduced in the late nineteenth century] performance that used the *Mek Mulung* story of *Putera Cahaya Bulan*" (p.7).

In another interview, one of the lead characters indeed admitted that he associated the *Mek Mulung* with *Bangsawan* (Bibi Nurshuhada, 2015). Mohd Ghouse also remarked that:

the application of modern theatrical conventions and staging techniques undermined the aesthetic and performance characteristics of the original

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<sup>131</sup> Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with rotating monarchs drawn from the hereditary sultans of its various states.

folk theatre. In the end the Istana Budaya performance turned out to be a combination of western, pseudo *Bangsawan* with a sprinkling of traditional *Mek Mulung* elements. The simplicity and minimalistic, symbolic, cerebral traditional theatre form had been sacrificed for the glitzy modern theatre visuals, thereby putting further pressure on the survival of our traditional theatre heritage. (2015, p.7)

The evolution of the concertized performance of *Mek Mulung*, starting from performers of Wang Tepus themselves performing outside of their *bangsal* and on to the stage in 1966 to the highly stylized *Mek Mulung* by performers not native to Wang Tepus in 2015, show an exponential shift to how far the *Mek Mulung* can possibly be re-recreated to meet new audiences' taste. These performance directors' vision of presenting a grandiose interpretation of the tradition may please the uninformed audience. However, greater access to knowledge and exposure to heritage performances, as well as critiques from those who are knowledgeable about *Mek Mulung* like Mohd Ghouse, may lead to audience realizing and demanding a more realistic village adaptation.

#### **5.2.6 Audience Response to Recorded Online *Mek Mulung* Content**

Online video sharing websites such as YouTube provide more contemporary perspectives on audience response to *Mek Mulung* performances. Recordings of concertized *Mek Mulung* performances, as well as *Mek Mulung* related materials that are uploaded onto these websites provide evidence of audiences who consume these videos and express their views through the comment sections of the videos. For this section of the analyses, I will discuss the responses from 105 *Mek Mulung* related videos which were retrieved from YouTube. I will not include other social media sites because the videos may not be available to the general public. Recorded responses from individuals towards *Mek Mulung* through these websites provide information on how much viewers can

comprehend from the videos, whether they are viewing *Mek Mulung* performance for the first time, or they are viewing it to relive what they have previously experienced.

Several documentaries were made during the early 2000s on the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* that showcased its tradition. The National Museum of Malaysia, whose footage is accessible online, has gained over three thousand views at the time of this writing; there is also a series of footage available from JKKM. A more recent documentary, which showcases the performance of *Mek Mulung* in its Wang Tepus context, is made available in conjunction with the launching of the *Mek Mulung* book on 2014.

I accessed the videos through the main search engine and the list of *Mek Mulung* or its alternate spelling *Mek Mulong* hits were analyzed. *Mek Mulung* videos that had no *Mek Mulung* tags were excluded by the search engine and thus were not included in the search hits. The first eight videos which showed up from my YouTube search on *Mek Mulung* on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2019 were not from Wang Tepus. Hits nine and twelve are documentaries about *Mek Mulung*. From the list, only four videos are Wang Tepus documentaries, two made by university students as part of a course assignment, and the others are urban performances which include concertized performances as well as *Mek Mulung* inspired performances, such as dance, new compositions, and rehearsal videos. Out of the 105 videos, only 38 of them have comments.

Out of the 38 videos, four have neutral comments that are unrelated to the video performance, such as the quality of the upload or advertising another video. Out of the balance of the 34 videos, 28 have mostly positive remarks. These range from very brief and few comments such as “good” or “I really enjoyed this performance”. Six videos have more hostile or negative comments. Out of the six, three came from the documentary of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*. The discussions and analyses which follow in this section

are highlighted videos that debate online audiences' understanding and acceptance of the performance.

The first video comments viewed on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2019 (Figure 5.1) come from responses to an uploaded video of a concise version of the DVD published by the National Museum.<sup>132</sup> The four-minute-and-nine-seconds video highlights the ritual aspects of *Mek Mulung*. The first comment enumerates the inclusion of ritual practices in the *Mek Mulung* performances in the Museum footage that are against Islam (*syirik*) and suggests that the religious police from the Kedah Religious Department (*Jabatan Agama Islam Kedah - JAIK*) take action. It translates as, "Because of these practices (*syirik*) everyone has lost their minds. They are trying to say that it's heritage. Dear JAIK please oversee this issue". The second translates as "Malay people these days either would follow the Arabs or the westerners (literally translates as whites)". The second comment implies that perhaps the rituals are brought in from foreign sources whereas *Mek Mulung* is very much a local custom. The third response asks the question, "Is this the performance that takes place once every two years? You can't say anything bad about this performance, its tradition. Some people believe that this dance is compulsory because it is something that is agreed upon since ancient times ... Great dance, awesome culture". This viewer probably wanted to balance the negative comments, even though the two-year performance information is not accurate.

The fourth returns to the religious theme: "What does JAKIM (the Federal religious police) has to say about this??? JAIS/JAIK ??? Ulama ??? Mufti ??? (referring to religious leaders). To this, there were two replies: The first, "These contain Hindu

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<sup>132</sup> The video description box mentions that the video was made by the National Museum (Sudirman, 2010) as an exhibit for the customs museum (*Muzium Adat*). The link to the video is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u74Biy6H0Ko&t=5s> (Accessed on 7 April 2019),

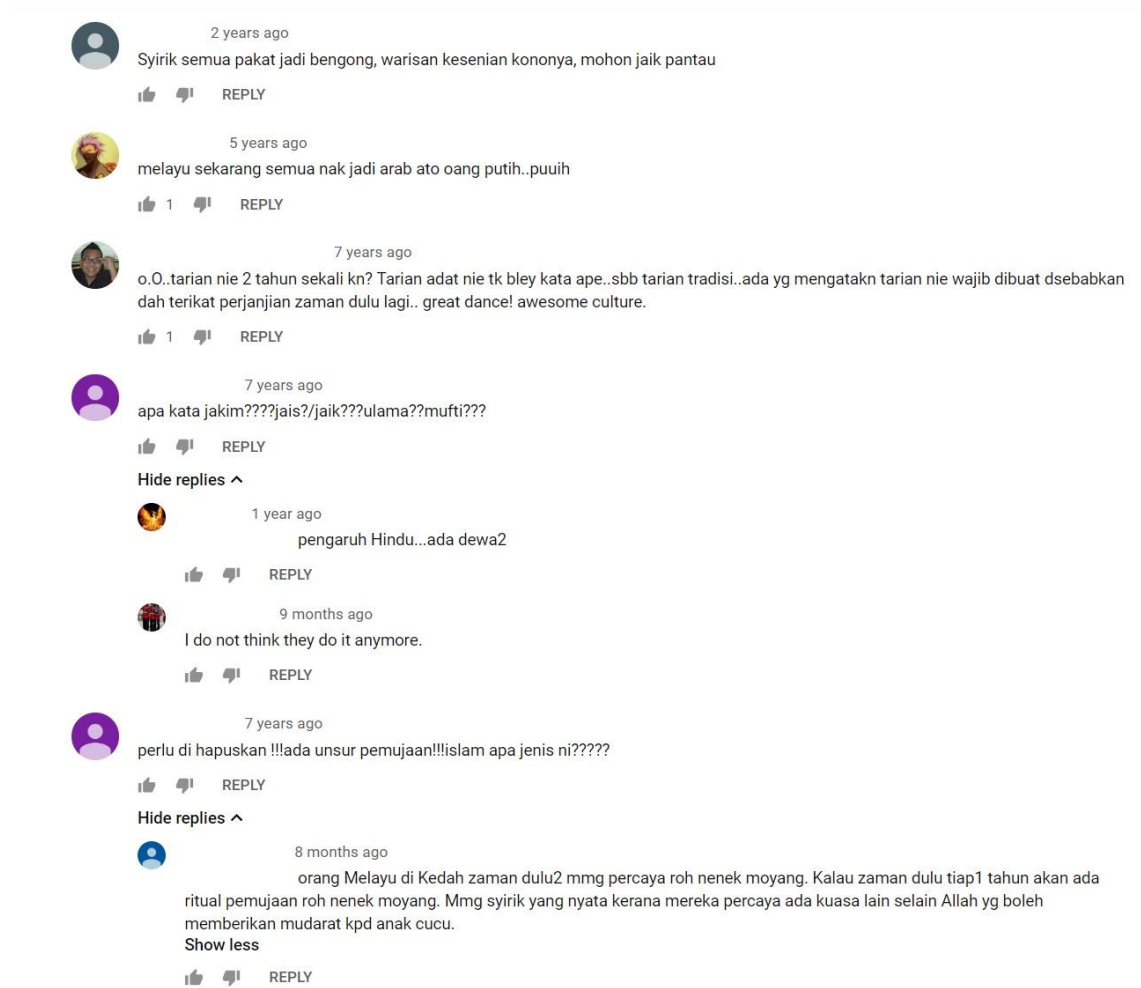


Figure 5.1: Responses toward a YouTube clip from the National Museum documentary on *Mek Mulung*.

elements, there are deities involved”; the second: “I do not think they do it anymore”. The fifth comment referring to the ritualistic element, commented “It should be destroyed!!! It contains shamanistic elements!!! What kind of Islam is this?!!”. This comment receives a reply which says, “Dear sir, the Malays of Kedah in the old days do believe in ancestral spirits. Previously, an annual ritual would be held to appease the spirits. It is indeed un-Islamic (*syirik*) because you believe in higher powers besides God”.



Generally, the comments were very hostile with no intent to understand further the background of the performance. From the responses that individuals shared on the website, it is very clear that most of these respondents found themselves uncomfortable with the content and thought it unsuitable for viewing because the images of offerings demonstrated that the performance contains un-Islamic elements. Comments expressing discontent overpower the one positive response, that it is a form of tradition that is part of an ancient Kedah Malay culture, and therefore something worth preserving. The feedback I got from the Wang Tepus performers is that they were undeterred by these comments as they rationalized that these were made by those who are uninformed of their culture.

Another video<sup>133</sup> viewed on YouTube (Eddy, 2011) is an uploaded documentary by the JKKN Kedah which received comments that are more positive than those made towards the Museum documentary (Figure 5.2). The second respondent was interested to do a research on *Mek Mulung* and requested to be contacted further by the Administrator. The third commenter writes, “I pity you infidels”, while the last writes, “Congratulations for preserving this tradition ... and make improvements to the performance so it aligns with the teachings of Islam. Continue to defend this tradition by removing the un-Islamic elements”. While the third comment was very harsh, the rest of the comments show interest in the performance. However, the un-Islamic elements is still an issue to these individuals.

In a recent documentary uploaded by ITBM,<sup>134</sup> (Figure 5.3), a comment suggested that the *Sembah Guru* ritual is against Islamic teachings and should be removed altogether

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<sup>133</sup> The URL link to the YouTube video is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wa8S21ZUyS8&l=48s> (Accessed on 7 April 2019).

<sup>134</sup> The URL link to the YouTube video is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkCEvHkztbw&t=5s> (Accessed on 7 April 2019).

(ITBMtv, 2014). However, it was followed by a short reply which says, “It doesn’t have to”.



Figure 5.2: A YouTube comment on a JKKN Kedah documentary on *Mek Mulung*.

From the responses to the videos from three different sources, elements in the performances which are deemed un-Islamic are the main concern expressed by the respondents.



ITBMtv

Published on Nov 6, 2014

Saksikan bingkisan khas Panorama RTM1 mengenai Mek Mulung, yang diisytiharkan sebagai seni warisan Kedah. Buku MEK MULUNG: Kesenian Perantaraan Manusia dan Kuasa Ghaib Warisan Kedah Tua merupakan terbitan Institut Terjemahan & Buku Malaysia dengan kerjasama Bina

SHOW MORE

2 Comments

≡ SORT BY



Commenting publicly as Nur Izzati Jamalludin



3 years ago

lagi elok kalau sembah guru dihapuskan. bertentangan dengan syariat. syirik yang nyata!

👍 1 🗨️ REPLY

Hide replies ^



1 month ago

tak perlu

👍 🗨️ REPLY

Figure 5.3: YouTube comments in response to the documentary on *Mek Mulung* by ITBM

In sharp contrast, responses to videos showing the concertized version of *Mek Mulung* are more positive and encouraging and reflect none of the controversy so overt in the responses to videos of the village version. Many of the comments describe the concertized *Mek Mulung* performance as very entertaining.<sup>135</sup> For example, in the most recent PPAG performance (Figure 5.4), the fifth comment “dapat juga tengok rindu...” translates as “finally I have a chance to see this ... I miss this” (ayu syuhara, 2012b). This

<sup>135</sup> The URL link to this video is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=po6gYd7YsEU&t=357s> (Accessed on 7 April 2019).

reflects the respondent's satisfaction in finally being able to see the performance after not being able to see it for a while. Comment number two, five, and six (not counting the replies in this order) give the impression on how funny the performance was. A reply to comment number three even requests for CD materials from the uploader.

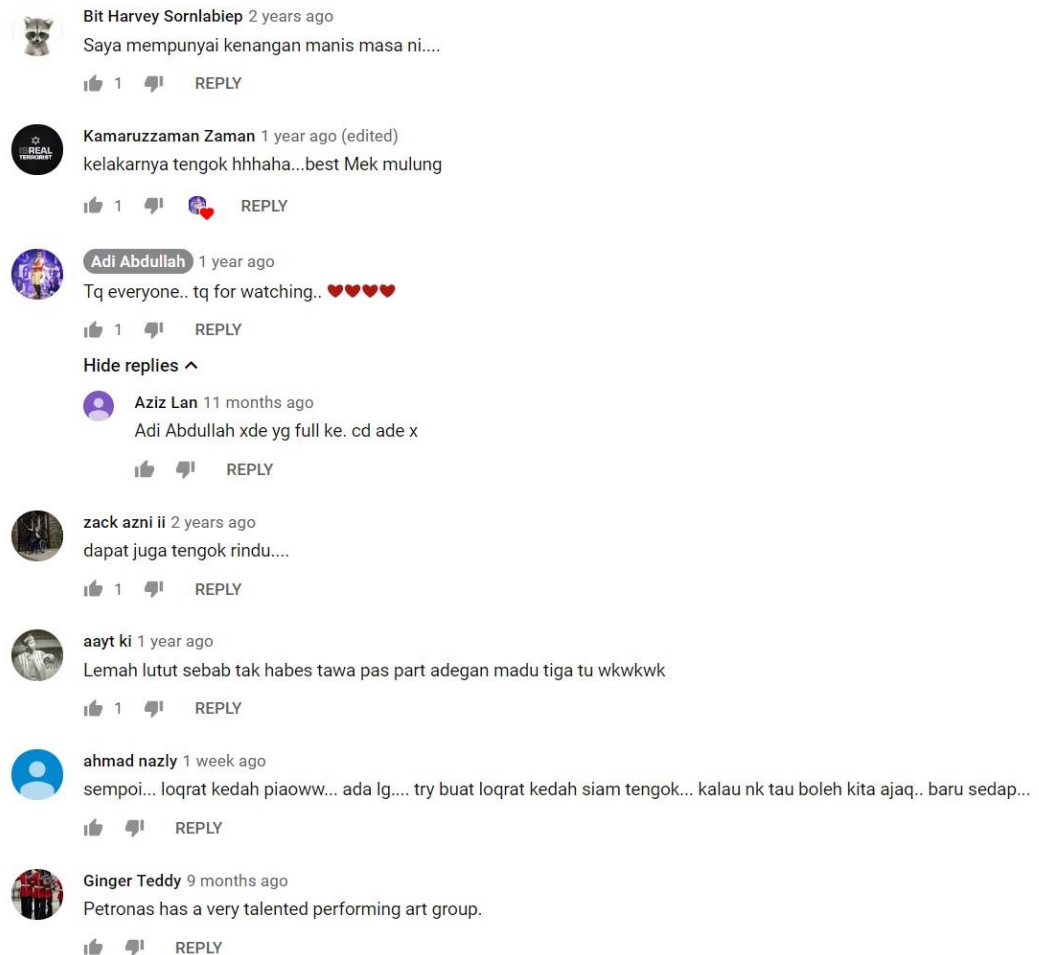


Figure 5.4: A YouTube comment thread from the PPAG *Cahaya Bulan* performance in 2011.

Another interesting upload is a series of comments about the PPAG's performances of *Malim Bongsu* in 2007 (Figure 5.5).<sup>136</sup> Only part of the full comment thread is shown in Figure 5.5. The person who uploaded the video claims to be one of the performers from the PPAG playing the *Awang* character in the production (ayu syuhara, 2012a). A respondent says that he was among the audience and exclaims “I was here!”. The video uploader responds to the reply with “Wow! Did you enjoy the show? Hehehehe”, to which he responds “I extremely enjoyed the show. I hope there will be more shows like this in this area”. This is then responded by the video uploader/PPAG performer with, “PPAG is now defunct and there will be no more shows like this ... but JKKN Kedah does perform (*Mek Mulung*)”.



Figure 5.5: A YouTube comment thread that engages an audience member with a former PPAG performer.

<sup>136</sup> The URL link for this thread is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KuR14Xlh7go> (Accessed on 7<sup>th</sup> April 2019).

Another interesting thread (Figure 5.6) comes from an uploaded YouTube performance of the JKKN's *Gerak Timpuh* dance (Lydia, 2018),<sup>137</sup> presented as an excerpt of *Mek Mulung*. The comment writes, "This is not *Mek Mulung*. *Mek Mulung* is full of ritual and mystics". An individual then comments, "You are right... *Mek Mulung* in the present time is mainly for entertainment to preserve its heritage... if the rituals are still present in the performances none of the audiences would come to see the show... sometimes (the rituals) are also performed as gimmicks which can ruin the image of the *Mek Mulung* performance". From this observation, I deduce that there are individuals who are aware of the rituals involved in the *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus. The question is to what extent are these individuals informed. At the same time, are there audiences who do believe that veiling the ritual aspects during the performance will help keep spiritual elements away from the public eye, but still preserve the tradition within the performers themselves?

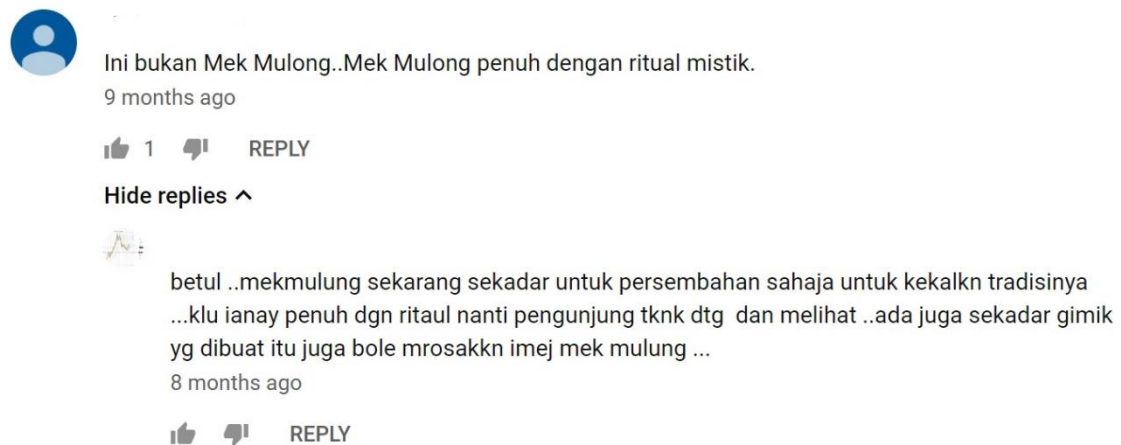


Figure 5.6: A YouTube comment thread to a JKKN performance.

<sup>137</sup> The URL link for this thread is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcWSaA8a2ug> (Accessed on 10 May 2019).

The digital online content documentaries of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* received hostile remarks regarding the performance, especially towards its spiritual elements. It is worth noting that the documentaries reflect the director's cut on portraying a specific gaze on the performance, which focused more in the ritual aspects rather than the theatre itself. Thus, the mysticism of the performance became exoticized and caused negative reactions from the sensitive Muslim viewers. This group of digital audience failed to make connections with the available Islamic elements that are present in *Mek Mulung* during the performance. For instance, the song text of the Berjalan ke Bilik Ayaq has contents referring to actions implying performing ablutions before prayers and the *syahadah* which is the Islamic creed. In the dance section also, when singing the phrase about the *syahadah*, dancers had their index fingers pointing straight upwards as a symbolic gesture to God and His oneness.

Referring to the respondent who commented that it is a tradition and compulsory for rituals to be part of a performance (Refer Figure 5.1), it was also acknowledged that the spiritual element cannot be separated from the performance if it is to be considered a *Mek Mulung* presentation. In the case of the *Mak Yong* in Kelantan, Ghulam-Sarwar expressed his discontent when the ritual and theatre aspects were separated which, in his opinion, changed its aesthetics and became artificial. It is these spiritual elements that make the performance a *Mak Yong* (Ghulam-Sarwar, 2017); and the same can be said about *Mek Mulung*. To stress his point, Ghulam-Sarwar states his view about *Mak Yong* which I feel is applicable to *Mek Mulung*:

I believe that to fully appreciate it, one has to approach *Mak Yong* with an eye not just on its superficial aspects of theatre, but on its inner symbolic and spiritual meaning or meanings that lie buried in the dramatic repertoire, its music and dances and its origins. In this lies the uniqueness of *Mak Yong*. This is what makes *Mak Yong* invaluable, apart from certain exciting

elements within it as a theatre genre. As things stand, *Mak Yong* has not been appropriately studied; nor it been given due recognition by relevant authorities, in the latter case due to both ignorance of its inherent values or too narrow perspective. (2017, p. 7)

The concertized PPAG *Mek Mulung* recordings uploaded on YouTube, up to April 2019, are positively received by most of the online respondents. One commented that the cross-dresser performers should be replaced by female performers (Tahir, 2013).<sup>138</sup> Another made queries about the accuracy of the description of the performance (mysenibudaya JKKN, 2015).<sup>139</sup> These comments by online audiences are very encouraging and very supportive of the concertized *Mek Mulung* in which they express the hope that it would be performed on a regular basis.

Although there are negative remarks from a few respondents, these do not invoke the sensitivity of the Muslim audience to react as what has been the case with the documentaries. The concertized *Mek Mulung* is shaped to fulfil the ideal romanticism of *Mek Mulung* to the audience, creating what Elizabeth Outka refers to as the commodified authentic (2009). Rustom Bharucha (1989) further explains the impact of invented tradition, as discussed in the previous chapter, whereby these traditions are enhanced by technology to mediate the traditions into a “historical extravaganza”. With the growing middle class and the demand for various forms of entertainment, tradition is viewed as a “spectacle” (p. 1907). With no reference to the spiritual element of *Mek Mulung* in the concertized performance, it is widely accepted by the local audience. Reflecting on Ghulam-Sarwar’s remarks, that the spiritual elements are important aspects of the

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<sup>138</sup> The URL link to the YouTube video is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cii7i5eckII> (Accessed on 7 April 2019).

<sup>139</sup> The URL link to the YouTube video is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPob4IFwpTs&t=85s> (Accessed on 7 April 2019).



performance, therefore, is it possible for *Mek Mulung* to remain as *Mek Mulung* without its significant spiritual elements? From remarks of the Wang Tepus performers (mentioned in Chapter Three), it clearly shows that these elements should not be separated and therefore, to them, no reproduction of *Mek Mulung* is acceptable other than the *Mek Mulung* as performed by the Wang Tepus performers.

Most of the dialogues engaged in response to YouTube digital uploads for the concertized performance consist of positive comments. Most of the respondents indicate that they enjoyed the performance, express the need to support *Mek Mulung* as an important traditional art form, and express pleasure that they have been exposed to learning opportunities about the *Mek Mulung* tradition through YouTube. Respondents were also able to engage and interact directly with *Mek Mulung* performers through the comments section, and to keep informed about future performances.

Responses expressed towards digital uploads of *Mek Mulung* performances indicate stark differences in YouTube audience perception towards the village version and the concertized version. It is not known whether the audiences, when making their comments, took into consideration the coexistence of the two distinct versions: the village and the concertized. There is no information whether respondents had watched both versions before indicating a preference for one over another. The hostile remarks represent individual viewpoints towards the ritual aspects of *Mek Mulung* which they regard as going against mainstream Islamic views. Gary Bunt (2009) refers to these comments or the need for someone to make a comment as a form of exertion of self-efficacy on one's Islamic views and imposing religiosity, which represents a minor version of what he terms as "digital jihadi", a form of religious crusade in the digital world and protecting the cyber "ummah" or digital community. Expressing their views through anonymous comments

ensure them a sense of safety without having to expose their identity, yet satisfying their need for self-gratification through expressing their dislike for a non-Islamic event that has taken place.

### **5.3 Understanding the Multi-audience Perspective**

By examining these four types of audience responses using multiple kinds of sources, I will show that responses reveal much about different audiences' prior knowledge about different *Mek Mulung* versions. *Mek Mulung's* live performance in different locations clearly attracts different crowds. Audiences tend to show taste preferences for specific styles of *Mek Mulung* presentation, and these very rarely overlap. In this section, I discuss the association between the specific type of *Mek Mulung* performance and their target audience. The production process takes into consideration the producer's knowledge of the important characteristics of the target audience. I also describe the necessary criteria for a "successful" performance in different contexts.

Just like many other live performance forms, *Mek Mulung* is a "multi-sensory, immersive, aesthetic, musical and social experience" (Minor *et al.*, 2004; O'Reilly, Larsen & Kubaki, 2013). The performance experiences are shared and created between the performers and audiences with certain dynamics shaped by the atmosphere at the time of the performance. No two *Mek Mulung* performances are exactly alike, and are thus "perishable, once produced and consumed" (O'Reilly, Larsen & Kubaki, 2013, p. 10). Each staging of a *Mek Mulung* performance is unique in itself, as a result of factors such as time, space, and the perception of the target audience. Different audience behaviors, such as in the case of *Mek Mulung* audiences in Wang Tepus and those in urban concert

halls, can offer insights into behavior patterns of other traditional performing arts, such as the *Mak Yong* in Kelantan.

The urban consumer audience at the PPAG performance in 2011 and the largely student audience at Universiti Malaya five years later have different sets of expectations of a concertized performance. Both groups of respondents reported some prior knowledge of a *Mek Mulung* performance. That prior knowledge was most likely limited to the concertized form, considering that a majority of the audience did not know that the performance originated from Wang Tepus, only that it was a traditional theatre from Kedah. In terms of the specific productions of *Mek Mulung*, the audiences' responses were shaped by a performance repackaged according to producers' assumptions about that particular audience's taste, based on previous experience of their responses to similar repackaged traditional forms such as *Mak Yong*. Some of respondents in the 2011 PPAG audience had no more expectation than that they would have a good time because they knew what to expect of a staged traditional performance presented by the PPAG. Joy and Sherry regard urban staging to reflect largely "the producer's perspective of consumption that dominates the discourse of the experience" (2003, p. 280). Expectations that are present in "traditional performance in urban settings are in part shaped by producers' catering in sophisticated ways to what they think will be popular as traditional forms among their cosmopolitan audiences, who compare and are exposed to such forms from time to time. In relation to the changes wrought to traditional dances by newer choreographers, Mohd Anis (2001) explains that "(t)he image of the traditional folk dances is sustained by the kinds of music that accompany dances of the same genre while the gestures are more pronounced by using more space of the dancer's kinesphere" (p. 66).

*Mek Mulung* performances by PPAG and by AKRAB were held at large-scale venues, at the DFP in the Petronas Twin Towers and at Istana Budaya, respectively. These venues have the technical facilities and support to offer urban audiences with experiences that meet, or pass beyond, their cosmopolitan expectations. The ticket price charged should be what the target consumer audiences are willing to pay towards the performance experiences. Particularly important to wealthy urban audiences is novel spectacle, newness of things to look at. Laura Mulvey explains that between aesthetic performances and their audiences “(t)here are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (2001, p. 186). The pleasure of looking is an important aspect in considering audience enjoyment in repackaged concertized *Mek Mulung* performances (Auslander, 2008; Elsaesser & Hagener, 2010).

An entertaining and pleasurable *Mek Mulung* staging which translates into a successful performance in an urban concertized setting requires producers to highlight performance features that cater to the audiences' expectations of a satisfying spectacle. Among the characteristics of urban audiences that producers have to consider in their reconstruction efforts are that they are, on average, middle income wage earners, with a small family size, and an interest in traditional performances that are suitably moral within a modern Islamic state. Having established a loyal following from their other performances of traditional forms, the PPAG production team was able to utilize their knowledge of their market to gauge the needs of a potential urban audience for *Mek Mulung*, and adapt the form to suit them. O'Reilly, Larsen and Kubaki mention that,

fans use their consumption of live music to symbolize something about themselves both to themselves and to others. They will sacrifice significant amounts of leisure time and money to consume performances, seeking deep,

transformative experiences, sensory pleasures, and special moments of connection with artists and fellow fans. They form strong loyalties to musicians. Live music can be important symbolic resource for the construction of their identities, images, experiences, and relationships. (2016, pp. 12-13)

Such loyalty amongst PPAG fans is demonstrated through the response of one respondent from among the PPAG audience group who claimed to have attended almost all of the performances staged by the PPAG, and came to watch all the *Mek Mulung* performances for three consecutive nights. PPAG fans still use Facebook Fan pages and other social media platforms to communicate with group members and other fans. Based on fandom information, PPAG producers and promoters are able to communicate and gauge performances of *Mek Mulung* as a cultural product especially suited to their base.

Particularly interesting in the context of thinking about audience expectations and desires is the standard inclusion in the concertized version but not in the village version – of drag performers in key comic female roles. Catarina Peixoto Carvalho and Antonio Azevedo's (2018) article on branding luxury goods mentions Metz (1977) argues that the audience gaze in film spectatorship mediates "a relationship not of identification but of desire" (McGowan, 2003, p. 30). Such a desire is "also evoked [for men and women, homosexual and heterosexual spectators, etc] via the ambiguities of sexual difference" (2018, p. 87). The reconstruction of *Mek Mulung* in the urban presentation dramatically accentuates the role played by female impersonators, which is only an occasional logistical choice in the Wang Tepus form. The inclusion of *Mek Mulung*'s drag comedy content in urban performance is clearly an important part of its audience's attraction to the performance, and has become expected. Although this may not have been the initial producer's intention, drag characters have now become an integral part of *Mek Mulung*'s

characteristic branding. Audience responses to the 2011 PPAG performance confirm that they expected to be entertained in particular by *Mek Mulung*'s humorous content, which they did not perceive to be contingent on the involvement of a popular television comedian as a comic clown servant.

*Mek Mulung* performance in the *bangsal* in Wang Tepus is staged for other reasons, and only secondarily for entertaining a particular audience, as discussed in Chapter Two. The inclusion of ritual attributes that socially uphold the community's beliefs, and certain codified movements and behaviors have not transferred to the urban concertized version as they are unappreciated by that audience. Village audiences respond in various ways towards the performance as ritual. Some members of the audience start to tremble during key sections of the performance, going into a trance, responding to the actors and so forth. The presentation in Wang Tepus is done specifically for the community and translates important ritual and social meanings in gestures that are understood by the community. I noted, for example, in Chapter Two that walking in a circle signifies that the performers are moving from one place to another. Although circular walking movements are practiced in other Southeast Asian performing arts conventions, audiences do not apply the same significance to that particular gesture; it means different things to different audiences. Schechner (2013) notes that codified actions prevalent in a particular performance style may have their own special meaning delimited to that context. Because not all of the conventions are necessarily fully understood, or they evolve over time, Counsell & Wolf (2001) regard the symbiotic response between the performer and audience as one in which "the viewer performing interpretive acts predicted by the viewed, while the viewed itself – the object as it is perceived – is in turn constructed,

endowed with meaning, in the gaze of the viewer” (p.177-178). This enables new interpretation of meanings of gestures in the performance.

Now that the *Mek Mulung* performance has shifted to an urban setting, how do its pleasures compare in relation to other entertainment products in visual form? Technological advances have made new entertainment media accessible at an increasingly cheaper rate and thus live *Mek Mulung* and other performing arts must increasingly compete for market share. These competing forms of spectacular urban entertainment include cinema, western concert orchestra, musicals, art installations, the internet, and many more. Globalization, especially through digital visual media, further injects international spectacular values into local forms that might once have been considered foreign. *Mek Mulung* is not immune to these developments. This is a global phenomenon that impacts performing arts commodities, such as theatre, everywhere. The cost of other forms of mass entertainment, which can be cheaper and more attractive, must also be considered (Rebellato, 2009). To attract audiences to *Mek Mulung* performances, then, producers tap consumer-audiences through marketing strategies which can connect and give greater symbolic meaning to the *Mek Mulung* performance within the semantic network of the urban audience. Symbolic meaning, as Richard Elliot points out, provides the opportunity to “construct, maintain, and communicate identity and social meanings” (1997, p. 285). Baudrillard (1981) is of the opinion that “...consumers no longer consume products for their material utilities but consume symbolic meaning of those products as portrayed in their images” (p. 286). Signs then construct identities that can be inferred through symbolic performance forms. O’Reilly, Larsen and Kubaki reiterates that:

we can conceive of consumption as a process of meaning-making, and the notion of ‘active’ or ‘creative’ consumption recognizes that consumers are reflexive about their consumption activities, actively interpreting or

judging, appropriating or resisting the text offered for consumption. The meaning of the music is not only 'in' the music itself as coded, performed and decoded aurally, but in the consumers' acts of engagement with it, the accounts which they give of it and the cultural categories which they use to talk about it. (2013, p. 9)

In traditional arts performances, much symbolic value is obtained through the marketing of elements of memory and nostalgia to audiences. As a means of resisting the overwhelming sweep of rapid globalization, a form like *Mek Mulung* gives the illusion of nostalgia and a sense of groundedness in tradition in a fast-paced urban world. Stephen Legg notes that "as the longing (Gr. *Algia*) for home (*nostos*), nostalgia is defined as the longing for a home that no longer exists—or never exists" (2004, p. 100). The audience member who came to watch *Mek Mulung* on three consecutive nights in 2011 conveyed her sense of grief and "pre-nostalgia", knowing that the PPAG was staging their final performance before the group was disbanded. Her participation was deeper than most: she had performed with PPAG as a dancer during its early days and had become an avid follower of the performance troupe. Another respondent who lives in Kuala Lumpur gave as her reason for attending the performance that she is from the state of Kedah and *Mek Mulung* reminded her of home. Nostalgia also gets partially at what the respondent at MaTiC meant when he said he felt the "*roh*" (spirit) of the form as it was performed. Yet this emotional connection, this yearning for the splendor of traditional performance like *Mek Mulung* in cities which offer very little in the way of tradition, obscures the concertized *Mek Mulung*'s distinctly non-traditional formation. Nostalgia gives wholly new identities and meanings to these urban performances because most of its audience has never seen the performance in Wang Tepus (Schechner, 2013).



Producers in cities like Kuala Lumpur, strive hard to create a *Mek Mulung* production that is entertaining and appropriate to stimulate the expected emotional experiences in urban audiences. The ultimate experience is to achieve what is termed by Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) a “hedonic response” (Radbourne et al., 2009). Based on Lacher and Mizerski's definition, Santoro and Troilo describes hedonic response as:

a combined response from the emotions, senses, imagination, and intellect...consumers expect...[hedonic] products and services to create an absorbing experience...arousing their emotions stimulating a physical reaction, soliciting their memories and fantasies, and triggering their cognitive development. (2007, pp. 109-110)

In order to attract audiences, it is imperative that the producers instill a belief that the audiences will achieve these experiences.

*Mek Mulung* urban audiences continue to grow and evolve alongside projects by the state government to promote Kedah. The same level of enthusiasm is not shown by the now largely dormant audiences of the Wang Tepus community. While the symbolic value of the urban *Mek Mulung* performance is gaining currency, the village performance no longer holds an important value in the lives of the audiences of Wang Tepus. Performances remain scarce in large part because there is lack of demand from among the audiences of Wang Tepus to revive them.

I noted in earlier chapters (Refer Chapters One and Two) that villagers whose livelihood is dependent on paddy farming have less time to engage with the performing arts since the government introduced planting paddy twice a year. This is as true of audiences as it is of performers. In the early 1980s there was a significant rise in rural to urban migration among villagers in search of better job prospects. During the village performance which I recorded in 2010, the audience was comprised largely of those in

their forties or older. Members of younger generations—those now under 50—have almost detached themselves from the activities of the village, in part because villages are stereotypically associated with poverty and backwardness.

Other, newer modes of entertainment have replaced audiences' desire to see *Mek Mulung* performed. Television seems to be the main source of cheap entertainment, and I observed that a large number of the villagers have smartphones and tablets that are internet enabled. The spiritual aspect which has traditionally given meaning to *Mek Mulung* has almost disappeared, confining the ritual knowledge to a select few who will conduct rituals in private when deemed necessary. Thus, the spiritual significance of *Mek Mulung* has now become less important to village audiences at the same time as it has had to compete more fiercely with other forms of entertainment; this explains the decreasing demand. During an interview, one of the musicians explained, "I will only perform *Mek Mulung* for entertainment purposes. I don't believe in the spiritual element of the performance; therefore, I will not go into a trance".<sup>140</sup>

## 5.4 Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to explore the nature and attitude of the audiences who turn up to watch *Mek Mulung* performances staged at different venues and who have responded to *Mek Mulung* presentations in various formats. To a large extent, the information provides an understanding of their motivations and levels of acceptance of the form. Understanding the current state of play can help in proposing suggestions to maintain audience retention and promote future *Mek Mulung* performances. The audience responses I have collected may not only help sustain *Mek Mulung*'s performances both in

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<sup>140</sup> Interview with Pak Din on the 14 November 2016 at his residence.

the Wang Tepus and urban formats, but also other performing arts with similar characteristics.

Understanding the audience is important towards gauging their levels of knowledge about *Mek Mulung*. Considering the popularity of concertized *Mek Mulung* is still on the rise and ideas of what it is now have not yet hardened, there is plenty of scope for audiences to learn more about *Mek Mulung* in the form that is practiced in Wang Tepus, the reason for its continued presence there, and the purpose it serves for the practitioners. Most importantly, I hope my research will help these audiences to recognize that the *Mek Mulung* that they see has been reconstructed for the urban environment, and that changes were made to accommodate and meet their expectations. At the same time, the people in Wang Tepus may be encouraged that there is a much larger audience for their traditional form than they may realize, and they can take pride that their tradition is recognized as having important heritage value and finds its place among other performing arts performed in big cities at the national level and internationally. Recognizing this, it may give the people of Wang Tepus the impetus to reclaim their tradition and improve it from the grassroots up by encouraging the involvement of younger generations, or at least acquiring sufficient knowledge to explain the tradition to those wanting to know more about it.

Robin Harris (2017) mentions the case of the Olonkhosuts towards the end of the Soviet era which saw most traditional performers becoming almost completely extinct. Those who have heard about the Olonkho during their childhood years recalled their grandparents' activity with the art and made attempts through memory and improvisation to reconstruct the Olonkho that is performed today. The role of the intervening researcher also played a part when folklorists interested in the Olonkho travelled around the region to record and document the performance as well as encouraging interest within the

community. Although one generation was lost in continuing the tradition, it was able to be revived using whatever remaining collective memory that was able to be recovered. Along the same lines, *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus, which is currently showing signs of heading towards extinction, can draw lessons from the Olonkhosuts' experience. With several committed researchers like Zamzuriah and I, there is hope to continue to sustain the ongoing meaning and significance of the *Mek Mulung* tradition beyond the contributions made by the remaining living performers who continue to practice it.

## Chapter 6

### *Mek Mulung* Moving Forward: Creative Innovations

#### 6.1 Introduction

Traditional performing arts can continue to be relevant to the needs of new audiences. In some cases, this requires development into new and contemporary creations. Audiences of *Wayang Kulit* and *Mak Yong*, for instance, have enjoyed the many innovations introduced into their performances, even before government agencies like JKKN had emerged to promote these forms at the national level. Through adapting and evolving their arts, traditional performers make them relevant to current audience expectations. *Mek Mulung*'s audience had their first exposure to a performance by the Wang Tepus village troupe on the proscenium stage outside their village when they performed for JKKN Kedah at Taman Budaya Auditorium Alor Setar. It was a major step forward to move beyond their normal *bangsal* performance space. In consideration of its potential for exploring new forms of presentation, capturing new audience, and familiarizing general public to the tradition, such an undertaking by the traditional performers provides exposure and adds contemporary value to the village form of *Mek Mulung*. Further changes and innovations can be expected when professional performers make necessary adaptations to suit appropriate performance venues and target audiences.

*Dewa Kaca*, *Dewa Muda*, *Cahaya Bulan* and *Malim Bongsu* continue to be the most commonly presented *Mek Mulung* stories by professional performers on the proscenium stage. Their continued popularity with audiences is ensured by contemporary

directors introducing creative inputs to their presentation, which enables these stories to attract and retain audiences' interest as well as compete with other new forms of entertainment products. Traditional performing arts enthusiasts, specifically *Mek Mulung* connoisseurs, may want to explore and experiment new and creative ideas to make *Mek Mulung* performances as major attractions to audiences with varied cultural backgrounds, especially within the Malaysian context with its diverse population groups.

This chapter discusses a number of different creative ideas that have been successfully applied by various *Mek Mulung* performance groups up to the present time, and considers possible avenues for future innovations. I discuss how *Mek Mulung* has developed in relation to other traditional forms, especially *Mak Yong* and *Wayang Kulit*, that have likewise made adaptations to incorporate innovations, while at the same time ensuring the sustainability of their traditional village versions. Efforts to ensure the continued existence of the traditional village version while at the same time expanding its innovative potentials, are addressed in light of meeting *Mek Mulung*'s fulfillment of Kedah state heritage status as well continuing to maintain its contemporary relevance.

## **6.2 Problematicizing and Theorizing Contemporary and Creative *Mek Mulung***

*Mek Mulung*'s trajectory as a new contemporary performance form can be understood through the concept of arts sustainability, which provides the basis for the argument that changes and adaptations are necessary while taking into consideration the new audiences' current needs, practices, and expectations.

I will use Robin Harris's (2017) concept of "stable and malleable elements" and Norzizi Zulkafli's (2017) five key practices towards intercultural creativity to construct my arguments on sustainability. Issues highlighted by Harris and Norzizi have important

implications for the potential creation of innovations for *Mek Mulung* performances so that they may find significance in different contexts, spaces, and spheres. Complementing the already established concertized style of *Mek Mulung*, creative inputs to performances would enable *Mek Mulung* to be introduced and appreciated in many other ways.

The adaptation of *Mek Mulung* performances into different packages for different circumstances and events enable them to be explored and expanded in multiple ways. In *Storytelling in Siberia*, Robin Harris (2017) proposes that traditional arts have both stable and malleable elements that allow intangible traditional performing arts to build resilience. Harris concurs with Philip Bohlman's idea that innovation is crucial to the vitality of a tradition and that "stability of this core provides the backdrop for innovation" (1988, p. 118). Harris (2017) and Bohlman (1988) believe that the stable and malleable frameworks and elements of a form enhance its cultural significance. In Siberian Olonkho performance, an epic storytelling genre from the Sakha people in North Russia, "the interactions of the core of the tradition with creative innovations will inevitably produce some variations encouraged by audience reactions. Over time, these new developments become part of the more stable core" (Harris, 2017, p.119). Thus, it is imperative for the performance makers and performers to identify core concepts of the form as well as variable current approaches that both contribute to the vibrancy of the performance.

Findings from my previous research (Nur Izzati, 2014) and discussions in earlier chapters of this thesis reveal that stable and malleable factors likewise underpin the continuing existence of *Mek Mulung* today. Figure 6.1 presents a list of the notable stable and malleable elements of *Mek Mulung* derived from my analyses in previous chapters. Among others, stable elements include the performance structure and spoken dialect. The same structure or performance sequence has systematically been performed throughout

Stable Elements		Malleable Elements	
Musical Forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Piece/Song order</li> <li>• Piece/Song Function</li> <li>• Song text</li> </ul>	Musical Forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Song verse order</li> <li>• Ornamentations in the Song/Piece</li> <li>• Musical ensemble</li> </ul>
Theatre Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structure order</li> <li>• Kedah Dialect</li> <li>• Main character names</li> <li>• Main props (Masks, whips, dagger)</li> <li>• Mandatory phrases</li> </ul>	Theatre Presentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performed storyline</li> <li>• Additional props</li> <li>• Performance space</li> <li>• Location</li> <li>• Duration of the performance</li> <li>• Comedy Improvisation</li> <li>• Costume</li> <li>• Number of performers</li> <li>• Gender of the performers</li> <li>• Time to perform</li> </ul>
Dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic dance patterns</li> </ul>	Dance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ornamentation in the dance patters</li> </ul>

Figure 6.1: Stable and malleable elements of *Mek Mulung* performance in Wang Tepus.



the past several decades in both forms, without drastic changes. From statements by the performers, my own field observations, and evidence from video recordings made in the 1980s, the crucial opening structures of the *Mek Mulung* performance have remained the same until today. Such stable elements maintain the distinctive identity and character of a form within a particular time frame; it is this that has allowed the *Mek Mulung* performance to be perceived as distinct from other forms of traditional theatre. Through the passage of time, some stable elements may lose their stability due to various social changes. For example, a former *serunai* player who no longer performs in the *Mek Mulung* Wang Tepus troupe, remembers and is still able to perform a fifth song in the opening section. However, the current *serunai* player who replaces him is not able, and has never taken the initiative to learn to play the fifth song. Hence, in the current ensemble, the fifth song has ceased to be a part of the opening section.<sup>141</sup>

Harris (2017) explores Schrag's (2015) theory to explain how the interactions between the stable and malleable elements in a performance contribute to the synergy and energy in an active performance. Without malleable elements "stable structures will decay and dissipate. And without stable undergirdings, the creators in malleable forms will have no place to hang their musical hats" (Harris, 2017, p. 119). In the case of the Olonkho, Harris strengthens the malleable aspects in order to allow the stable elements to become more dynamic. In the case of *Mek Mulung*'s current village performers, the presence of strong stable elements with few malleable elements, is a major weakness in the village-based *Mek Mulung* performance. These village-based performers are reluctant, for whatever reason, to introduce fresh new interpretations in the performance, or include new approaches to the performance, which has negative implications for the revitalization of

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<sup>141</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah, 1 September 2018.

the traditional *Mek Mulung* within its own community. During one of my interviews with one of the Wang Tepus performers, I asked if other Kedah epics could be introduced and incorporated into the *Mek Mulung* performance, such as the well-known epic *Mahsuri*. His plain answer was that, “it has not been done before”.<sup>142</sup> His answer does not imply that it is fully permissible, nor does he reject the idea.

Events in previous decades have revealed a number of malleable elements in *Mek Mulung* performances, both village and urban. Among things that have successfully been changed without diluting *Mek Mulung*’s distinctive identity are roles being played by professional actors, special costumes being used, changes in storyline, and varied performance lengths. In the village-based performance, among the more noticeable malleable elements have been the performance of female roles by men to deal with the shortage or lack of female performers. For instance, during the performance in 2011 at Wang Tepus, without a female performer to play the *Puteri* character, Abang Mat played the roles of both the *Puteri* and the *Raja*. The readiness to make adaptations in response to external changes has, I suggest, been what has enabled the *Mek Mulung* tradition to survive over the past several decades. However, in recent years there has been a substantial decrease in interest among the people of Wang Tepus to ensure the continuation of the tradition, especially a lack of performers among the younger generation to replace the older.

In terms of the music ensemble, two instruments fell into disuse when they could not be repaired. These time keeper instruments, the *canang* and *mong*, do not affect the rhythmic line unduly and the *kecerek* and gong were considered sufficient for keeping time. Since the documentation by the National Museum,<sup>143</sup> there have been no efforts to

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<sup>142</sup> Interview with Abang Mat, 9 August 2018.

<sup>143</sup> Jabatan Muzium & Antikuiti, 2002 (Department of Museum & Antiquity, 2002).

re-introduce these instruments back into the Wang Tepus ensemble. Such replacement in instruments are not unfamiliar to Malaysia's performing ensembles. The high cost required to stage a properly constituted traditional *Mek Mulung* performance mitigates against the improvisation of performances using lower budgets. Elsewhere, for example, among the Sama-Bajau communities in Sabah, in Malaysian Borneo, many families and villagers can similarly no longer afford the *kulintangan* ensemble. But with the advancement of technology, the melody or sometimes the whole musical ensemble is now often replaced by keyboard or recorded music while accompanying the Igal dance. Performers are able to customize their performance based on the host's ability to pay (Ellorin, 2011). Within peninsular Malaysia, the *Gendang Silat* ensemble uses recorded music or hires live ensembles that vary in size to accompany performances at weddings or corporate functions. Similarly, performers of *Wayang Kulit Gedek*, a Kedah version of the Thai *Nang Talung* (Ghulam-Sarwar, 1992), had already modernized the performance completely to suit the community's more contemporary tastes.<sup>144</sup> Using appropriate strategies, the cost of staging *Mek Mulung* performances could be reduced to make it more affordable so that it could be performed and enjoyed by the village community on a regular basis.

Without malleable elements, a tradition loses its dynamism. Changing modes of entertainment and technological advancements will continue to squeeze the relevancy of performances within their locales. The stable elements create a frame within which the malleable elements can interact with current social trends. Thus, a combination of stable and malleable elements promotes resiliency of performance forms to enable them to adapt

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<sup>144</sup> The late *Dalang* (Puppeteer) Pak Majid who inherited the *Wayang Kulit Seri Asun* from his late father pioneered the innovation of modern design puppets. The puppets are seen to wear modern attire like jeans and tight modern *kebaya*. Modern elements such as airplanes and motorbikes are also used in his performances. The stories are also new and can be tailored to suite the sponsor. I have been fortunate to have met Pak Majid during his lifetime and attended several of his live shows.

to various social, cultural and political pressures. Elements may also move back and forth becoming stable or malleable over time, encouraging recontextualization, and enabling reinterpretations of the performance in order to preserve its vitality.

The second concept that I will discuss here is Norzizi Zulkafli's five key practice approaches towards creative intercultural activities. The five key approaches towards creative intercultural performance that she highlights are: (1) Cultural Sensitivity, (2) Cultural Belonging, (3) Aesthetic Integrity, (4) Collaboration, and (5) Openness (2017, p. 2). Norzizi discusses these aspects specifically in relation to the staging of *Throne of Thorns*, her adaptation of *Mak Yong* using a storyline based on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and performed in English by an entirely Australian cast. She argues that these five factors need to come to the fore in an era of rapid globalization. Under accelerated globalization and urbanization, tastes for different genres of performing arts have become more homogeneous, to the extent that global-cosmopolitan taste has even spread into the sphere of traditional performing arts. This trend is already apparent in *Mek Mulung* in the move from village-based traditional-themed *bangsal* performances to urban/modern proscenium-stage performances. But she also suggests that if the reconstruction and adaptation of the performance is not done carefully, there is a danger of producing something regarded as insufficiently "local", appearing more globally homogeneous.

As we saw in Chapter Five, Mohd Ghouse (2015) expressed a similar opinion in his review of a *Mek Mulung* performance staged in *Istana Budaya*. While he acknowledges that traditional performances can utilize new stage technology, he argues the resulting performance should not reflect characteristics belonging to a different performance genre. Ghouse thought the performance too closely resembled the *Bangsawan*. Of particular concern in a hyperconnected digital world is that urban

performance audiences in Malaysia are increasingly expecting a “good performance” to resemble their ideas of western splendour, even when staging a traditional performance. Norzizi’s production explicitly explored the inevitability of global mixing. In including cross-cultural aspects within the performance, Norzizi aimed to play with ideas put forward by Patrice Pavis (2010) on intercultural theatre, whereby “in our contemporary world where cultures are ‘intertwined’ there is no power to control cultural changes” (p.1).

It is thus imperative when considering *Mek Mulung*’s future as a discrete contemporary form that boundaries should be established to signify and maintain its unique characteristics, while keeping it clearly distinct from other performance forms. In other words, while efforts are made to inject creative and innovative ideas into the traditional performance, the uniqueness of *Mek Mulung* should not be compromised lest its resilience be undermined. Throughout the years, *Mek Mulung* has held a position of great importance to *kampung* Wang Tepus, in providing a ritual source of safety, and a space for villagers to congregate and socialize. Although these ritual and community functions are no longer much associated with *Mek Mulung* performances, it has proven to have a special appeal to other surrounding communities and, of late, urban audiences find it interesting because these communities in the past had enjoyed watching it. In a private conversation recently with a JKKM Malaysia officer during the International Conference of Dance Education 2018 in Kuala Lumpur, he revealed that the JKKM is aware of *Mek Mulung*’s considerable following in its neighboring communities. Those who have had exposure to *Mek Mulung* performances during their childhood continue to appreciate and look forward to performances by the JKKM during the course of the year.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Personal communication at International Conference of Dance Education 2018 (ICONDE), 2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> August 2018, Kuala Lumpur.

The ensuing discussions in this chapter will take off from the questions posed here. How can various individuals and organizations use new creative methods and innovative strategies to revitalize *Mek Mulung* to ensure its sustainability? In what ways can creativity and innovation produce a demand for the performance that would remain respectful to the practices and sentiments of the holders of tradition? Norzizi's five key practices address these issues while being mindful of the possible consequences of the changes made both in the village and the urban setting. In her *Mak Yong* production based on *The Tempest*, Norzizi emphasizes:

What becomes apparent through the creative research is that when creating intercultural contemporary work it is important, not only to approach the creative process with sensitivity, always maintaining Bharucha's notion of 'cultural respect' (1996, p.20) for the traditions employed—partly by ensuring that there is a historical link to the cultural traditions employed by the practitioners—but also to be aware that ethics and integrity need to be taken into account. (2017, p.2)

Her proposed key practices provide bases for my discussion of past, present, and future performances in *Mek Mulung* that may involve hybridity between contemporary and traditional performing arts.

### **6.3 Creative *Mek Mulung* Practices within other Theatre Forms**

*Mek Mulung* is only beginning to emerge as a form on which new creative experimentations may be made, unlike the more visible traditional arts of *Mak Yong* and *Wayang Kulit*. New theatre productions provide an outlet for traditional forms, such as *Mek Mulung*, to be presented beyond its conventional settings, be it in the traditional-village or concertized-urban form. Another instance of *Mek Mulung* making its presence in other contemporary forms of theatre is the idea of a children's small school production

employing *Mek Mulung* characteristics. Additional creative efforts include expanding the existing repertoire of known *Mek Mulung* stories through the introduction of new stories. Or older ones, especially those which have been forgotten, when newly discovered, can be reconstructed and incorporated into new *Mek Mulung* performances.

### **6.3.1 Mek Mulung in Zamzuriah's *Jalan Primadona* and *Section by Stesen***

The theatrical productions *Jalan Primadona* and *Section by Stesen* by researcher-activist Zamzuriah are two projects which specifically include the insertion of traditional elements into modern theatre. In both productions, Zamzuriah incorporates *Mek Mulung* elements and gestures as part of the performance, uses scripts from *Mek Mulung* characters, and includes songs sung during the *Mek Mulung* performance. In *Jalan Primadona*, audiences are made aware through program notes of the incorporation of *Mek Mulung* elements in the production. Thus, audiences knowingly anticipate *Mek Mulung* content as well as being introduced to the adoption of *Mek Mulung* into a novel setting (Figure 6.2). These two Zamzuriah's theatre productions are not the only performances that have incorporated *Mek Mulung* elements for inspiration in their performances. However, in these two productions, Zamzuriah explicitly made it known to the audience beforehand the source of inspiration for the performances, rather than keeping silent and letting the audience, who may or may not be familiar with *Mek Mulung* and its stylistic characters, make their own discoveries during the performance.

*Jalan Primadona*, directed by Faridah Merican of Actors Studio<sup>146</sup> and Zamzuriah herself, is a musical monodrama. It portrays the story of an individual, named Donaliah,

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<sup>146</sup> The Actors Studio is a theatre company set up in 1989 by a husband and wife team, Faridah Merican and Joe Hasham. Their goal is to develop Malaysia's performing art scene, provide training in theatre and performance spaces. They house two venues, the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre and the Penang Performing Arts Center.

going through the process of becoming an entertainer. Throughout the process of learning, Donaliah interacts with individuals from different ethnicities and backgrounds, and encounters various traditional art forms. In the form of a musical monologue, Zamzuriah performed all the characters and introduced twelve new compositions which she herself produced. A large part of the performance was based on Zamzuriah's personal experience



Figure 6.2: Promotional poster for *Jalan Primadona*, 2015.

(Source: Zamzuriah's personal collection).



as a traditional performing arts practitioner, and her struggles as a female, Muslim performing artist. From discussions with Zamzuriah throughout this research, similar issues to those surrounding her past performances, such as the *Usikan Rebab*<sup>147</sup> that she performed three times; first, during her Undergraduate days in 2006, then an updated and extended performance in 2012 and 2014 (Khairul, 2014). The performance brought out issues with regard to negotiating conflicting situations of being female, Muslim, and performing on stage unveiled.<sup>148</sup> *Jalan Primadona* provided a platform for Zamzuriah to address them from different perspectives. An important theme in the performance focused on bringing awareness that a shift has taken place in acceptable moral standards and social norms within the performing arts arena, as determined from the perspective of an Islamic-nation framework. Muslim female artistes donning the hijab while performing on stage or appearing in television programs is no longer a rare phenomenon. Looking back to the past, such phenomena were very rare.

In an interview with Deric Ect (2015a, 2015b), published online, Zamzuriah explained that the piece was designed to bring home to the audience the challenges of performing traditional performing arts in a situation where they have to compete for attention with modern and contemporarized traditional arts. It was also in this article that Zamzuriah initially indicated her intention to make this her last performance; but she has recently had a change of heart. During my conversations with her, Zamzuriah expressed her wish to fully don the hijab, which she currently observes but only when she is not performing.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> A recorded performance of the 2012 show of *Usikan Rebab* is uploaded through YouTube <https://youtube.com/watch?v=bTPZryRKdD4> (Accessed on 6 April 2019).

<sup>148</sup> Zamzuriah's *Usikan Rebab*, in which she received her award for best promising actor in 2006, also brought forth issues of conservative Islam towards performing arts practitioners. The performance was staged three times, the last being performed at Kuala Lumpur performing Arts Centre KLPAC in 2012 which I was fortunate to have the opportunity to watch.

<sup>149</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah, July 2015.

In the performance poster of *Jalan Primadona* (Figure 6.2), there is a clear indication that the performance showcases a variety of traditional arts genres, including *Mek Mulung*. During the interview with Ect (2015a), Zamzuriah mentioned that her initial idea was to convey to the audience that *Jalan Primadona* was about her own life journey through the performing arts. However, she later decided that by specifying the inclusion of different varieties of traditional performances in the performance poster, she might encourage those coming to the show to empathize and share her concern for the dying traditional arts, thus creating a wider impact. Zamzuriah believes that “it is important that people to not only know about *Mak Yong*, but also *Mak Yong Riau* and *Mek Mulung*” (Ect 2015a; 2015b). When asked about the significance of this performance for the public, she noted her sense that local art forms have made achievements that are recognized and being discussed internationally; but sadly, within the local context, these performances are sidelined by the locals themselves who are increasingly concerned with debates about what is morally or aesthetically right or wrong within a specific genre of performing art. Zamzuriah is also concerned that while increasing numbers of international researchers and practitioners are showing interest and getting involved in local performing arts, not as many of the local talents are equally enthusiastic about researching and publishing on local traditional arts.

In *Jalan Primadona*, the *Mek Mulung* component is introduced in the second half of the performance, following the 15-minute intermission. The scene depicts Donaliah’s narration of Zamzuriah’s actual learning process which involved her repeatedly going to Wang Tepus during a period of three years to study *Mek Mulung* under the tutelage of the late Pak Leh. According to the script (in Kelantanese dialect):

*“Mak Yong kita jadi makin teruk tau, dok baloh samo sendiri. Orang-orang Mek Mulung, mereka tak begitu! Tiga tahun aku ulang alik ke Wang Tepus Kedah umah Wa Pak Salleh, Pak Saad, Pak Din dan Abang Mat. Mereka baik! Mereka tak kedekut ilmu! Aku belajar dengan Wa sampailah dia meninggal dunia”.*

*“Wa nak tidoq atas riba adik boleh ka? Anak Wa jauh, bini Wa lari minta cerai. Wa duduk sorang-sorang”.*

*“Boleh Wa. Wa lagu mengulik raja tuh lagu mana dah?”*

“Our Mak Yong is degrading, we are fighting amongst ourselves. The Mek Mulung practitioners, they are not like that! For three years I went in and out of the village of Wang Tepus in Kedah to meet Pak Salleh, Pak Saad, Pak Din and Abang Mat. They are all very nice! They never withheld information! I studied with Wa (a fatherly address for Pak Salleh) until he died”.

“Wa said, ‘My child, may I lay my head on your lap? My daughter is far away, my wife ran away and has asked for a divorce. I live on my own’”.

“I said, “Yes. Wa, how do I sing the ode to a sleeping king (*mengulit*)””?

In the scene that follows, Zamzuriah sings the Lagu Mengulit from *Mek Mulung*. Donaliah, the character, also mentions names of various real-life performers in the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* troupe, and how much she misses Wa or Pak Leh. In the following sections, three other *Mek Mulung* songs are performed, including parts of the Bertabik, a few lines of the Timang Welu and a quatrain of the closing song. The songs provide a sampling of *Mek Mulung* to the audience; they are well received and contributes to the performance’s popularity. The publicity garnered was such that the 2015 staging of *Jalan Primadona* began to serve as an introduction to *Mek Mulung* for new audiences. Thus, Zamzuriah succeeded in publicizing and promoting *Mek Mulung* through her modern theatre presentation, even though this was not her primary aim. A further testament to her success in promoting various underappreciated genres of traditional arts through *Jalan Primadona* was the subsequent commitment from JKKN to fund her next project in the form of a music album. The album, which is expected to be launched in early 2019,

consists of a medley of traditional songs, which includes those from *Mek Mulung*, as well other songs that she has composed herself.

Following the success of *Jalan Primadona* in 2015, Zamzuriah staged another monodrama in 2017 titled *Section by Stesen*. She explains the connection between *Jalan Primadona* and *Section by Stesen*: “If *Jalan Primadona* was about a primadona on the edge of retiring, *Section by Stesen* was about the primadona making a comeback to the stage.”<sup>150</sup> Unlike Zamzuriah’s previous performances of *Usikan Rebab* (2012) and *Jalan Primadona* (2015) which were both directed by experts in producing traditional-intercultural-contemporary performing arts, *Section by Stesen* was directed by Ida Nerina, a well-known TV actor.

In *Section by Stesen* (Figure 6.3), a series of short performances taken from *Mak Yong* of Kelantan, *Mek Mulung*, and *Mak Yong Riau* were crafted into a form appropriate for a contemporary, modern theatre production. These short scenes, selected from different traditional performing arts genres, provide a sampling of Zamzuriah’s contemporarization of these performances to fit an urban setting. The character, played by Zamzuriah herself, demonstrates her opposition to thoughtless and inconsiderate modern changes to traditional performances when staged in urban settings. Just like the concerns raised in *Jalan Primadona*, *Section by Stesen* ends with the character lamenting contemporary public perceptions of practitioners who are female, Muslim, and performing traditional arts.

The performance of *Section by Stesen* was held as part of the Damansara Performing Arts Festival in 2017 and served as one of the Malaysian representatives for that festival. The *Mek Mulung* section started mid-way through the performance,

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<sup>150</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah, 30 September 2017.



Figure 6.3: Promotional poster for *Section by Stesen*, 2017.

(Source: Zamzuriah's personal collection).

following a scene of a section from *Mak Yong* of Kelantan. The scene opens with the character, the *Puteri*, played by Zamzuriah, calling upon an *Inang*. In this performance, the *Inang* character was played by Zamzuriah's eldest son, at that time a six-year-old traditional arts prodigy, Kamarul Baihaqi.<sup>151</sup> The audience is introduced to three standard items of the *Mek Mulung* repertoire, the Burong Odang, the Panggil Inang and the Terkejut Jaga. Taking from the known performance structure of the *Mek Mulung*, Zamzuriah performed the scene in which the *Puteri* calls upon the *Inang*. In the following section,

<sup>151</sup> Kamarul Baihaqi is Zamzuriah's eldest son and is in training to become a *Wayang Kulit Kelantan dalang* or puppeteer.

Zamzuriah introduces the *Mak Yong* of Riau. These sections are tied together with a series of verses from *Dikir Barat*<sup>152</sup> that are sung in Zamzuriah's native Kelantanese dialect.

A review on the Critics Republic website, a local online theatre review website, describes the performance spiralling downhill after the second half of the performance (Fasyali, 2017). In comparison with *Jalan Primadona*, this review suggested that the performance of *Section by Stesen* was a hodgepodge of various traditional arts performances lacking a clear direction in terms of its storyline. Nevertheless, through these two performances, Zamzuriah provides an avenue for *Mek Mulung* to be featured in a contemporary modern theatre performance.

### **6.3.2 *Mek Mulung* in Children's Theatre, *Magika Mek Senik***

Another form of theatre performance produced by the Kedah state JKKN, which incorporates aspects of *Mek Mulung*, is the 2016 musical theatre production for and by children titled *Magika Mek Senik* (Mek Senik's Magic or the Princess's Magic) (Figure 6.4). I was fortunate to be able to witness this performance at the Taman Budaya Auditorium in Alor Setar.

Performers were selected from among students in several primary and secondary schools in northern Kedah. Although there was no mention of it being inspired by the traditional *Mek Mulung* performance, there was clear use of *Mek Mulung* elements. These aspects were brought forward through characteristic identifiers, such as the names of the characters and the types of characters. For example, the name of the main female character in this story is *Nang Mara* which is the name of the princess in the commonly performed *Mek Mulung* story *Cahaya Bulan*. *Nang Mara* in this children's production is also

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<sup>152</sup> *Dikir Barat* is a traditional Kelantanese form of chanting.

addressed as *Mek Senik*, which is also used by all the *Puteri* characters in *Mek Mulung*, regardless of their character names in the story plot. Other characters also include the *Raja*



Figure 6.4: Promotional poster for *Magika Mek Senik* outside of Taman Budaya Auditorium, Alor Setar, 2016. (Photograph taken by the author).

and the *Awangs* which are typical of *Mek Mulung* performances. The *Raja* in this performance was also addressed as *Cek Wang*, which is the same term used by *Awang* when addressing the *Raja* in *Mek Mulung*. Anyone among the audience who has had exposure to, or knowledge of, *Mek Mulung* performances can identify these characters as coming from the *Mek Mulung* tradition. There is also the *Mek Mulung* “feel” in *Mek Senik* dialogues because of its use of the Kedah dialect. In addition, the interactions between the



*Raja* or *Che Wang* and the *Puteri* or *Mek Senik* were profoundly similar to those in the *Mek Mulung* performances. Other characters include *Raja Ligor* and *Permaisuri* (the queen) of Ligor. Ligor is also the Thai location from where *Mek Mulung* is supposed to have originated from. Finally, the character of the *Raja Gergasi* is another character from a *Mek Mulung* story.

However, as a children's theatre performance, costumes and props were modified to be appropriate for characters played by children. For example, *Awang* characters in *Magika Mek Senik* are dressed in clown costumes instead of donning the red half-faced masks of the *Awangs* in *Mek Mulung* (Figure 6.5). The storyline involves new fantastical elements which appeal to children, such as talking flowers and animals as well as the use



Figure 6.5: A scene in the *Magika Mek Senik* production, 2016. (Photograph taken by the author).



of moving fantasy-like backdrops. The music, too, is taken from Disney's movie 'Tangled' (2010), which is based on the European fairytale Rapunzel, with the song texts rewritten in the Malay language. A copy of the program notes, which was only made available to the guest of honour, does not mention any relationship of the performance with *Mek Mulung*. (I obtained the copy at the end of the performance when it was left behind by the special guest). Nonetheless, it is clear that the scriptwriter or producer has *Mek Mulung* in mind during the construction of the performance.

The performance was part of a showcase presented for an arts mentoring program conducted by the Kedah state JKKN, to promote the arts in schools in Kedah. This arts mentoring program is an ongoing program organized by the Kedah state JKKN on a weekly basis, whereby those interested can attend to learn various types of dances. JKKN Kedah also held a *Mek Mulung* singing workshop on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2018, as part of the festivities to celebrate their second 2018 Arts Interaction Series. During the workshop, I was fortunate to encounter a young woman who had earlier participated in the arts mentoring program, and another teenage boy who had attended the same program. The presence of the former indicates her interest had been sparked from her earlier exposure to *Mek Mulung*; while the latter makes use of the opportunities, like this workshop, to pursue his interest and develop his skills to perform a particular character, in this case, the *Awang*.<sup>153</sup> Such initiatives taken by the JKKN Kedah are moving in the right direction towards creating interest and providing a platform for interested individuals, especially the younger generations, to become familiar and develop knowledge about local traditional performing arts such as *Mek Mulung*.

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<sup>153</sup> From a recording of the workshop on the 11<sup>th</sup> August 2018.

### 6.3.3 Reconstruction of a Forgotten Story, *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas*

#### *Beradik*

The most recent staging of *Mek Mulung* that I had the opportunity to attend was performed at the Malaysian Tourism Center (MaTiC) on 17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> August 2018. It was presented as one part of several instalments of the 2018 JKKM Malaysia Traditional Arts Showcase (*Panggung Seni Tradisional* 2018). This time it was my own ongoing scholarly search for historical literature on *Mek Mulung* that provided the impetus for innovation. In 2017 I came across an unpublished thesis from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, documenting the Tale of the Twelve Sisters (*Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik*) (Zaleha, 1975). The story turned out to be one of the forgotten stories of *Mek Mulung*, and was described in great detail to Zaleha in the mid-1970s by the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* expert, Pak Taib, who is also Pak Saad's father. During one of my conversations with Zamzuriah in March 2018, she mentioned that the JKKM Malaysia had given approval for her to include a *Mek Mulung* component as part of its showcase of traditional arts at MaTiC in August 2018. Zamzuriah was delighted with the discovery of the Twelve Sisters story and decided to reintroduce this story for the *Mek Mulung* component of her showcase. Up to this point, there has been no known earlier attempt to reconstruct this story from the *Mek Mulung* repertoire, and it has been totally forgotten by the current group of performers in Wang Tepus.

Guided by the story presented in Zaleha's thesis, Zamzuriah developed the script, and directed it for a two-hour performance. The script for the performance presents a storyline chosen from the middle of the epic to enable it to be completed within the allotted timeframe. The cast consisted of a mix of former students who had taken the *Mek Mulung* course in ASWARA and Universiti Malaya, and selected professional artists from local

reality shows.<sup>154</sup> Several members of the Wang Tepus troupe were also invited to join the cast (Figure 6. 6). To date, this is the largest collaboration of performers from Wang Tepus with a professional cast, presenting *Mek Mulung* on an urban proscenium stage. Five performers from Wang Tepus were invited to Kuala Lumpur prior to the performance to provide training for the other performers, especially on the stylistic aspects of *Mek Mulung*.



Figure 6.6: Wang Tepus performers in the *Mek Mulung Puteri Dua Belas Beradik* performance. Standing in the middle of front row from left: Pak Din, Pak Dan, and Pak Ya. (Note: Pak Saad and Abang Mat are not in the picture). (Photograph taken by the author).

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<sup>154</sup> These guest performers were included as part of the cast through an open audition. Due to lack of financial sponsorships, the performers were informed that the production was not a profit-making project and readily accept whoever wanted to withdraw their participations in the production. Surprisingly, none of the performers actually dropped out from the production.

The performance mirrored the stage design style of an earlier *Mek Mulung* performance in Universiti Malaya. A *bangsal*-like structure was constructed on the stage and the performers performed underneath the structure and in front of it. The performers sat on the floor and several raised platforms, sitting mostly on the platforms when they were not acting. Another raised platform behind the musicians was decorated with a variety of clay pots to simulate the *para* (altar) where the offerings are traditionally placed. A similar representation of this ritual element is in the form of empty round trays being carried in swinging movements on to the performance space in Norzizi's *Throne of Thorns* production. Norzizi (2018) writes that "this 'swinging the tray' in circular movements is a form of salutation which hints the idea of 'eternal recurrence' ... It also echoes a ritual that occurs in Malaysia, in traditional dance, when welcoming guests" (p. 95).<sup>155</sup> The performance space has no *tiang seri* in this *Mek Mulung* performance. Instead a piece of yellow cloth is hung from under the roof of the stage *bangsal* to represent the spiritual cloth that is very apparent in the *bangsal* of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*. Colored paper-cutting designs also decorated the *bangsal* structure, similar to what is done in Wang Tepus.

The performance begins with the standard short Bertabuh as the curtain rises before continuing with the opening section. The performers wear beautiful elaborate costumes and extra props are used in addition to the standard props used in the village. Although Zamzuriah was the main decision-maker in the set/stage arrangement, the Wang Tepus performers had a level of input into the overall look of the performance. In

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<sup>155</sup> A full-recorded performance of Norzizi's *Throne of Thorns* (Shahnaz, 2018) can be viewed on YouTube in which the 'swinging the tray movement' can be seen starting from the first 53 seconds of the performance. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtys0KeRds> (Accessed on 29 March 2019).

preparing for the staging of the performance, Zamzuriah makes sure that the Wang Tepus performers have a significant say in its development.

Developing the story itself was a challenging task. The story is complex and requires much imagination. Reflecting on the audience comments on this performance which I documented in the previous chapter, several audience members interviewed indicate that the storyline was hard to follow in comparison with other well-known *Mek Mulung* stories. They suggest the subplots in the story do not always reflect the best moral values, with the inclusion of elements such as kings having concubines, cruelty, cockfighting, flying boars, and intoxicating substances. This moral discomfort suggests a possible reason why it fell out of favor with the previous generation of Wang Tepus performers, and therefore did not get passed on to the current troupe members. The large cast of twelve princesses plus the other main characters, comprising the king and his servants, the princess and her maids, also require a large-enough performance space to accommodate them. In addition, unlike in the stories that have survived into current performance practice, the main princess character is portrayed negatively in the form of the evil Ogre queen.

The Tale of the Twelve Sisters, being a newly reconstructed *Mek Mulung* story, provides a first addition toward the expansion of the known repertoire already available to current performers. This first attempt to reconstruct an older story for a *Mek Mulung* performance can be a catalyst for other stories, forgotten ones or new ones, to be staged as *Mek Mulung* productions. To my current knowledge, there are no traditional restrictions on developing new stories for *Mek Mulung*. This also appears to be the case with *Mak Yong*; Norzizi Zulkafli appears to encounter no problem with restrictions to contemporarize traditional *Mak Yong* by integrating them with Shakespeare's plays,

specifically *The Tempest* for the *Throne of Thorns* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for *Titis Sakti*. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has also been staged by the Five Arts Centre, Kuala Lumpur in the form of a Chinese traditional opera (Qishin, 2016).

It is worth noting that historically, proscenium-stage performances in Southeast Asia such as the *Bangsawan* were already adapting Shakespeare's plays as early as the late nineteenth century (Tan, 1989). These adaptations had to consider cultural sensitivities and local customs to enable new audiences to accept foreign material. Tan (1993) mentions a review by R. O. Winstedt in the *Straits Echo* on the 14<sup>th</sup> November 1908 which states that "scenes that offend Malay tastes or superstition like the grave-digger scene or the scene where Hamlet upbraids his mother ... are banished from the boards of the *Bangsawan*" (Tan, 1993, p. 126). Earlier predecessors of the *Bangsawan* theatre including *Wayang Parsi*, *Wayang Parsi Tiruan*, and *Komedi Stambul* also used Shakespeare's works in their performances (Cohen, 2016; Tan, 1993). Presently, a global Shakespeare website is available which aims to document events relating to readaptations of Shakespeare's works worldwide (Huang, 2011).<sup>156</sup>

In the past and in other cultures, Shakespeare's adaptations have taken into consideration existing cultural values, political views, as well as local tastes. During the Nazi occupation of Germany, several of Shakespeare's plays were readapted to enable them to be staged in line with the Nazi's racist ideology. Andrew Bonnell (2010) explains that the Jewish character, Shylock, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was portrayed as "... broad comedy or he could be demonized" (p. 170). All stage performances were audited by the government and that all "the text had to be adapted, and cut, to fit the demands of the Nazi ideology, and authorized version was eventually

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<sup>156</sup> <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/> (Accessed on 6 April 2019).

approved by the Reichschamarutg's office" (p. 177). In Japan, elements of translation and the subtle and unique Japanese expression pose a challenge in appropriating Shakespeare in traditional Japanese *Noh*, *Kabuki*, and *Kyogen* theatre styles. Appropriating Shakespeare's text and negotiating aesthetics of both Western and Japanese elements has to be carefully crafted to suit contemporary audiences (Takiguchi, 2013, pp. 458 – 459).

In section 6.3 earlier in this chapter, I raised the issue with Wang Tepus performers as to whether it would be possible to introduce a new story into a *Mek Mulung* performance. Abang Mat's response was simply that "It has not been done before". Implying that there are no specific restrictions set by the Wang Tepus traditional practitioners with regard to introducing new stories in the performances, there are wide possibilities for creative innovations in *Mek Mulung* similar to the evolution of *Mak Yong*. What is critical is that there should be open communication with the Wang Tepus practitioners, as well as efforts to collaborate on an equal basis with them, to encourage their efforts to keep the traditional practices alive, and to regain the significance of Wang Tepus as the original centre of the *Mek Mulung* tradition.

#### **6.4 *Mek Mulung* Inspirations in Dance, Film and other Art Forms**

As an established traditional arts practitioner and serious advocate for *Mek Mulung*, Zamzuriah has the necessary credentials to play a significant role in developing *Mek Mulung* towards contemporary theatre concepts. Her performances have sparked interest among arts enthusiasts and promoted active conversations about issues relating to traditional arts. Kedah state JKKN and the national unit is another driving force for experimental and contemporary performances. The Kedah state JKKN has taken the initiative to take the responsibility in continuing and expanding the efforts previously

shouldered by the PPAG in promoting and staging regular *Mek Mulung* performances within Malaysia and internationally. Apart from performing *Mek Mulung* as a reconstructed stage form, JKKN also experimented *Mek Mulung* themes in other performing arts forms.

#### **6.4.1 Dance Performances inspired by *Mek Mulung***

At the national level, the annual dance showcase organized by the JKKN Malaysia provides a platform for promoting creative dance pieces. During their annual dance showcase *Inspitari*, each JKKN at the state level is required to stage a choreographed dance piece that it has created based on inspirations from the state's heritage or cultural identity. In 2010, Kedah JKKN presented a dance piece, lasting for three minutes and 45 seconds, based on *Mek Mulung* (Figure 6.7). Titled *Gerak Timpuh*, which is an important piece in the opening of the *Mek Mulung* performance, it begins with the traditional Gerak Timpuh *serunai* opening melodic motif, with male dancers wearing gold and red masks representing the *Awang*'s masks.<sup>157</sup> A solo male performer dances in front of the other dancers, while holding the *rotan*, which is a prop that is used by the *Puteri* and the *Raja* in *Mek Mulung*. His movements resembled the movements of the *Raja*'s dance style. The motif of the Gerak Timpuh is then transferred to an electric keyboard with electronic percussion, as the main dance piece begins. A general observation is that the routine largely utilizes *Mek Mulung* dance gestures to construct the whole piece. The male dancers wearing masks use larger gestures similar to the *Awang*, and the female dancers dance as if they were the *Inangs*. However, new movements such as some acrobatics and some

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<sup>157</sup> Personal communication with a JKKN Malaysia staff, 2011.



hand gestures ensure that the performance is a *Mek Mulung*-inspired contemporary performance rather than strictly a section of *Mek Mulung*.



Figure 6.7: Performance in the *Gerak Timpuh* by JKKN Kedah, 2010.<sup>158</sup>

Events such as *Inspitari* are good avenues to stage *Mek Mulung* in a contemporary and experimental form. The audience members were clearly informed that the program was choreographed according to the criterion that it must represent the state's culture. The audience members were also informed about the dance relationship with *Mek Mulung* through video projections on screen while the dance was being performed. Although the lengthy explanation does take some attention away from the dance, it contextualizes *Mek Mulung's Gerak Timpuh* and the performance itself for a new audience.

<sup>158</sup> A screenshot from a DVD recording published by the JKKN (2010). The copy of the DVD is in the possession of the author.

A more recent *Mek Mulung*-inspired dance piece, titled ‘*Awang Oi Awang*’, was presented by the Nyala Dance Theatre group at the Borneo Arts Festival on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2018 in Labuan, Sabah. This contemporary dance piece consists of twelve dancers wearing red masks (similar to the masks worn by the *Awang*). A video of this presentation (Nyala Dance Theatre, 2018) was uploaded by the choreographer who had performed earlier in *Mek Mulung Puteri Dua Belas Beradik* at MaTiC in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>159</sup> It is mentioned in the video that the performance was inspired by the *Buka Panggung* ritual and the *Awang* character in *Mek Mulung*. The eight-minute long piece shows dance gestures which are characteristic of the *Awang* character, such as large gestures, clumsy movements, and comedic acts, and included some acrobatics in the performance. Props include smoke machines, flickering stage lights, and monotonous chanting. This was followed by a solo drum pattern and then the *serunai* playing as in the Bertabuh. The music then shifts to a fast-paced *gamelan*-like sound before the Berjalan song commences. Being awarded the second prize for their presentation in this competition, the group received RM5000 in cash.

#### **6.4.2 *Mek Mulung* Performed in a Television Series**

Film and TV are two further outlets for traditional performances such as *Mek Mulung* to be represented in different formats. Films such as *Perempuan Melayu Terakhir* (1999) regularly feature *gamelan* and *wayang kulit*. *Awang Batil Terakhir*, a movie in 2013 tells the story of a father who is an *Awang Batil* (a storyteller) hoping that one of his sons will take over his art. This movie was aired on national television and all of the music

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<sup>159</sup> The URL link for this video is <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvF8LQZ7QJw&t=3s> (Accessed on 12 May 2019).

was played by Pak Romli, an *Awang Batil* himself, from Chuping, in the state of Perlis. *Cek Pa* is another movie centred on *Hadrah* or *Nogey*.

*Mek Mulung* also appeared on television as part of a sitcom series in 2012 on channel RTM1, called *Mai Chek Mai* (Norhidayu, 2015). In 2013, the whole series of *Mai Chek Mai*'s fourth season was designed to include *Mek Mulung* as a performance theme. Season four was filmed in late 2013 and its premiere was aired on national television on RTM Channel 1 in September 2014.<sup>160</sup> The series used *Mek Mulung* characters, such as the *Awang*, in various modern-day situations. The story of *Putera Cahaya Bulan* was presented in the first episode (Figure 6.8). *Mai Chek Mai* was recorded in front of a live audience at the Kedah State JKKN auditorium, where locals could watch the recording process for free.



Figure 6.8: Promotional poster for *Mai Chek Mai*, 2012.

(Source: Mai Chek Mai facebook page).

<sup>160</sup> Mai Chek Mai Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/events/185759311614999/> (Accessed on 6 April 2019).

Pictures and Facebook comments describe a large crowd that had gathered to watch the recording of the show. Celebrity figures, such as singer Elly Mazlin and TV personality Sheila Mambo, were among the guests who appeared in different episodes. In all of the thirteen episodes in Season four of *Mai Chek Mai*, there were *Mek Mulung* characters. A fifth season was in the planning stage, with plans to include *Jikey* as the main idea of the sitcom, which was expected to be aired in early 2015. However, to date there is no further information on the outcome of this.

In a recent Facebook video upload by the *Mai Chek Mai* (2017) page shows the behind-the-scenes clip on the staging process of the TV production. The eighteen-minute video opens with Abang Mat, of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* troupe, sharing the history of *Mek Mulung*. This is followed by the appearance of the producers and technical team of the sitcom. The technical team highlights that a special LED screen is used to transport the stage to different scenic locations during the staging of the performance. The performers themselves give their inputs on their roles and experiences when performing in the special series of *Mai Chek Mai*. At the end of the clip, snippets of three episodes (episode one, two and nine) of *Mai Chek Mai* show the process of transforming a stage performance into a television production (Disebalik SKRIN, 2015).<sup>161</sup>

The clip shows that the music ensemble remains at the corner of the stage throughout the entire performance. Episode one shows the *Raja* having a conversation with the *Puteri*. Episode two shows the two *Awangs* and a character named *Melur* giving directions to *Tok Wak*'s house. Episode nine shows *Tok Wak* with the two *Awangs* and a beautiful lady. In the scene where *Melur* meets *Awang*, the LED panels show a backdrop

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<sup>161</sup> This upload can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/964695233574642/videos/968471453197020/UzpfSTM5NTY2NjA3Mzg5NDgwNzoxMjM1MzY3MDgzMjU4MDMx/> (Accessed 6 April 2019).

of a village scene. In the scene where the *Raja* is with the *Puteri*, the backdrop depicts the interior of a castle with moving clouds outside. The short clips of the three episodes are enough to reveal the extent to which the *Mek Mulung Cahaya Bulan* is expanded to be shown in thirteen episodes. It is interesting to note that it closely resembles the village performance whereby the comedic scenes are the highlights of the performance. The comedic interactions among the village *Mek Mulung* characters are largely improvised to enable the performers to act their characters without being constrained by having to end their antics within a specific time frame. Similarly, with a television show running for thirteen episodes, the character actors have longer time interacting among themselves. The story line helps to maintain the structure to the performance.

According to Pak Din, a good village *Mek Mulung* performance is dependent on the *Awang*'s ability to bring joy and laughter among the audience. This is almost a reflective style of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*, where the story is the base for building the performance. The jokes and interactions between the *Raja* and the *Awang* are what contribute to the uniqueness of each performance. According to Pak Din, when the *Raja* wants *Awang* to do something, he uses the rattan whip to coax *Awang*. The *Raja* hits *Awang* with the rattan whip confidently. During the 2011 performance, Pak Din noticed that this trait was lacking in Halim when playing the *Raja* character. Pak Din explained, "Pak Mulung (The Raja) has to perform confidently. Pak Leh ..., my uncle Man Jebung ..., in those days when he called for his *Awang*, he would get it. He would strike the *peran* (*Awang*) hard that he would fall down and almost sit on the floor!"<sup>162</sup> The *Mek Mulung* humor in the village performance is based on a combination of the characters' comedic

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<sup>162</sup> In Pak Din's words, "*Pak Mulung nih dia kena betoi-betoi. Pak Salleh nih, pak menekan saya Man Jebong tuh masa tuh kan, masa dia masuk panggil Awang tuh, ahhh... mampuih! Tuh macam peran, dia tibai terduduk uuuggghhh....*" (Personal communication on 14 November 2016).

ability with a good amount of slapstick, which is a perfect combination for television, especially when the comedy is relatively spontaneous. Unfortunately, neither Pak Saad, Pak Din, Abang Mat, nor I were aware of the television series being filmed or aired on national television. It was after I did some facebook search that I knew of its existence, but the last episode was already aired several months before that.

Performing *Mek Mulung* characters in a modern sitcom context that is aired on national television certainly brings in a dramatically larger volume of viewers who may want to know more about *Mek Mulung* with its characters and plots. In the sitcom, the characters retain their special outlook and features, a known stock story is performed, the Kedah dialect is used in the dialogues, and songs from the *Mek Mulung* are sung. The *rebana*, which has a thicker rim, substitutes for the *gendang ibu*. More characters are added, has a larger cast, and story plots involving current situations, such as during the staging of the show, the scene is of the two *Awangs* lying on a hospital bed. The tagline of the promotion poster reads “*Cerita orang utara untuk kita semua*” which translates as “Northern stories for everyone”. The series then targets a mass national audience, rather than just for the limited Kedah audience. A study may be carried out to look into the extent to which audiences understand *Mek Mulung* as portrayed in the television sitcom in relation to the version in its traditional Wang Tepus context.

#### **6.4.3 *Mek Mulung* in a Short Film Clip**

Another project, called the Pocket Production Course, provides another new outlet for *Mek Mulung*. Organized by the JKKN Kedah, it involves producing a short film clip

as part of a video filming workshop.<sup>163</sup> The short clip entitled ‘*Awang: Misteri Kedah Tua*’ or ‘*Awang: An Old Kedah Mystery*’ was uploaded through JKKN Kedah Facebook page and targets those who follow its activities. This short 1-minute and 20-second clip has no dialogue and is shot on a smartphone. The short clip is an experiment from that workshop, and revolves around a *Mek Mulung*’s *Awang* character before and after he puts on the *Awang*’s mask (Figure 6.9) (JKKN Kedah[a], 2018).<sup>164</sup> The objective is to show how a mask can be an object that transforms the person wearing it into a different person with a character which the mask is supposed to portray.

#### 6.4.4 *Mek Mulung*-Themed Wedding

In June 2014, a reality TV program winner of a theatre talent show, *Anak Wayang*, produced by satellite TV broadcasting service ASTRO, had media coverage of his wedding at his hometown in Alor Star, Kedah (Gun, 2014; Ridzuan, 2014). The winner, Hairi Safwan, was previously a member of AKRAB and now a promising television drama actor. Hairi stars in many television series both on national television and on satellite TV broadcasting networks. What is unique about this performance is that, according to local news reports, Hairi has chosen a *Mek Mulung*-themed wedding and he and his wife plan to make a *Mek Mulung* performance as part of the wedding reception. Hairi states that he and his wife has planned the wedding to include a half-hour performance of *Mek Mulung* with support of guests who are AKRAB members.<sup>165</sup> About a thousand guests who came for the wedding were entertained by the *Mek Mulung* performance presented by the bride

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<sup>163</sup> This video can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/jkkn.kedah/videos/pcb.432590290523852/432590160523865/?type=3&theater> (Accessed on 6 April 2019).

<sup>164</sup> This Facebook post can be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=432590133857201&set=pcb.432590290523852&type=3&theater> (Accessed on 6 April 2019).

<sup>165</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah, 1 September 2018.





Figure 6.9: Promotional poster for *Awang: Misteri Kedah Tua*, 2018 (JKKN Kedah[b]).

and groom. Such a celebration showed how a passionate and influential individual like Hairi can make an impact on the wider visibility of *Mek Mulung* (Ridzuan, 2015).

Hairi continues to perform on screen, on theatre stages and is one of the star performers playing the *Awang* character in the 2018 production of *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik*. While all these events take place in unconventional settings, these activities



show that *Mek Mulung* now has influence outside Wang Tepus and the urban concert halls, from active experimentation beyond the circuit of the Wang Tepus performers and the village *bangsal*. Among theatre enthusiasts, *Mek Mulung* is often looked upon as a unique form of theatre genre that identifies with Kedah theatre performers. The *Mek Mulung* tradition and its performance has become more prominent with the prestige accorded from being recognized as a state arts heritage.

## 6.5 Merchandising

Big budget musical performances in Malaysia are nearly always surrounded by supplementary commercial products associated with the performance and sold to consumers as souvenirs and memorabilia. These include t-shirts, playbills, CDs, DVDs and other products usually sold at the performance venue and are perceived to add value to the audiences' experience. These products are offered for sale to theatre enthusiasts and allow them to experience the performance vibe beyond the live moment of the performance. This scenario is not an uncommon sight for traditional performances in Kuala Lumpur and other major cities in Malaysia. The late Pak Majid, a *Wayang Kulit Gedek dalang*, or puppeteer, actively promoted various kinds of merchandise relating to *Wayang Kulit*. As an undergraduate at Universiti Sains Malaysia in 2005–2007, I had the opportunity to meet and interview Pak Majid for a class project. Pak Majid assured my friends and I that most of the details of his personal biography are in the book that he encouraged us to purchase. He also sold DVD recordings of his live shows. Pak Majid also advised that students should take a closer look at his trunkful of puppets, especially those older ones which were no longer commissioned for performances. His trunk included some unfinished puppets that he was in the process of making. He crafts the

remnants of goat hide that he uses to make his puppets into small keychains, which he also sells during performances.<sup>166</sup>

Pak Majid's reputation as an innovator of *Wayang Kulit Gedek* comes from his father who saw the need to contemporarize the performance to suit the needs of contemporary audiences and new situations. Pak Majid's *Wayang Kulit* troupe, *Wayang Kulit Seri Asun*, is very popular in northern Kedah. The group often gets invitations to perform at official state functions, whereby themes and the length of the performance can be fully tailored according to the organizers' needs. To facilitate their communication with potential clients, Pak Majid's group has their own website listing modes of contact and a listing of past events.

Unlike most traditional performing arts groups, troupes like Pak Majid's and Pak Dain's make use of digital entrepreneurial skills to promote their traditional *Wayang Kulit* performances and other services online. *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus, which is largely not visible to the wider public, is also not accessible online, apart from video content uploaded by third parties. Other information on *Mek Mulung*, are also made available via blogs which are not written by the performers themselves, through the JKKN website, or via online newspapers. In a highly mediated age, this makes direct contact with traditional *Mek Mulung* less accessible to potential clients, researchers and the general public.

Unlike other modern musical forms, staged urban *Mek Mulung* performances rarely do side-merchandising apart from the playbills or program notes. During the 2012 *Cahaya Bulan* performance by the PPAG, a bag printed with the performance poster was included with the purchase of program notes, but previously only programs were on sale

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<sup>166</sup> During the National Craft Day exhibition on 30 March 2012, after Pak Majid's performance, a stall was opened for visitors to look closer at the puppets and take pictures with Pak Majid. The stall displayed various crafts of *Wayang Kulit* (made of cow and goat hide) souvenirs by Pak Majid and his son. Items on sale include DVD's of performances, small keychains of cartoon characters made of hide, and miniature versions of his puppets.

during the performance. During the recent staging of *Mek Mulung Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik*, (17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> August 2018), printed posters were displayed during the performance in lieu of program notes. This appears to be a missed opportunity given the contemporary importance of the sale of supplementary merchandise during a performance to provide further promotional opportunities and remind the audience about past enjoyable experiences.

Through his role in the 2016 Universiti Malaya student production of *Mek Mulung Dewa Kaca*, one particular performer has since gained much fame through the success of his cross-dressed *Inang* character. Danesh Raj Nagarajan plays the character *Inang Hitam* in this performance (Figure 6.10). Being one of the few non-Malay performers has not



Figure 6.10: Danesh (right) and Izat (left) as cross-dressed *Inangs* in the Universiti Malaya 2016 production. (Photo taken by Pixelah; used with permission).

prevented him from enjoying celebrity status with a largely Malay audience, and he has established a large fan base. Taking advantage of his current popularity, he has embarked on a small business venture creating a product overtly associated with *Mek Mulung* and his character: he introduced the first six colors of his own lipstick line under the brand of Mak Inang Beauty (Figure 6.11).



Figure 6.11: Product label of lipstick inspired by *Mek Mulung*. Product logo used with permission of the owner. (Photograph used with permission by manufacturer).

Postings on his Instagram page indicate that Danesh's clientele include both women and cross-dressed males. The six lipstick colors are given names associated with *Mek Mulung* characters, such as Red *Mak Inang* (Red Lady Inang), Purple *Inang Bongsu* (Purple Youngest Inang), Dark Nude *Inang Hitam* (Dark Nude Black Inang), Creamy Nude *Inang Pengasuh* (Creamy Nude Wet Nurse), Red *Mek Senik* (Red Queen/Princess) and Deep Nude *Puteri Santai* (Deep Nude Relaxed Princess). Danesh recently expanded his product line to include a lip balm named after one of the *Mek Mulung* songs, *Puteri Masuk Ke Taman* (Princess entering the Garden).

Danesh's popularity and his association with the *Inang* character in his first *Mek Mulung* production has led him to secure a role as an *Inang* in the latest commercial *Mek Mulung* production. In *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik*, he played the character of the head maid servant, *Inang Sulung* or *Inang Tua*. Throughout the three nights' performances (17<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> August 2018), Danesh in his *Inang* character promoted his makeup line discreetly through product placement, incorporating it on stage as part of the performance. His comical approach in presenting the lipstick delighted the audience, which further emphasized the association of Danesh's lipstick, the *Inang* character, and *Mek Mulung*. Danesh, however, did not attempt to promote or sell his lipstick before or after each night's performance. On 1<sup>st</sup> September 2018, I had the opportunity to meet Danesh who served as a volunteer during a *Mek Mulung* workshop which I had co-organized with Zamzuriah. Through our casual conversation, he mentioned that he wanted to promote his products through various traditional arts platforms and approaches. He also revealed that there is such high demand for his lipsticks that he could not provide enough product or staff to sell them during the shows.

## 6.6 Summary and Conclusion

In light of various advancements in technology and both modern and global influences on many aspects of daily life in Malaysia, many new genres or hybrid performances are emerging. While modernity seems to pose a threat towards certain traditional practices and values, it also provides an incentive for artists to adapt and use these new ideas to develop other creative forms (Um, 2013). In the Korean context, Um has noted that creative innovations in traditional *P'ansori* have led to the emergence of a new genre, now called the *ch'angjak pansori* (Um, 2013). In the Malaysian context, Tintoy Chuo and Take Huat have injected new ideas into *Wayang Kulit* performances to introduce a new genre which they call *Wayang Kulit Fusion* (Cheang, 2013; TedX Talks, 2014). In the new and separate style of *Wayang Kulit Fusion*, the aspect of the traditional *Wayang Kulit* that is retained is the concept of the shadow screen and puppets. However, in the case of *Mek Mulung*, despite efforts to generate a variety of creative new performances utilizing various aspects of *Mek Mulung*, up to the present time, there is no evidence of an altogether new and separate style of *Mek Mulung* like the *Wayang Kulit Fusion*. Innovative ideas and creative forms of *Mek Mulung* can add to the development of new genres to the list of traditional theater performances. It can be in a variety of forms; one case in mind is the Kedah epic *Mahsuri* to be developed for a new *Mek Mulung* storyline, a suggestion which I put forward to Abang Mat (mentioned earlier in sections 6.2 and 6.3.3 in this Chapter). Making the traditional performers themselves actively involved in the production from its inception and participating in the performance, as Zamzuriah had successfully done in *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik* (discussed in 6.3.3), can be an important consideration to ensuring that the traditional bearers recognize and acknowledge it as a new and different form of *Mek Mulung*.

My discussion throughout this chapter has shown that if modernity and creative developments are embraced, *Mek Mulung* as a theatrical genre has many creative and innovative possibilities when taken out of its conventional performance space. These new platforms bring *Mek Mulung* into new contexts, introducing the performance to different kinds of audiences. In future, this will hopefully bring a new wave of interest in *Mek Mulung* proper, whether in its Wang Tepus traditional performance form or in its urban concertized version. This was already shown in the workshop on 1<sup>st</sup>–2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018, in which there were three participants who had become more seriously interested in *Mek Mulung* because they had previously seen Zamzuriah's *Section by Stesen* and *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik*. While in London in 2017, I met a Malaysian student who got to know about *Mek Mulung* after watching *Jalan Primadona*. Thus, exposure to performances that incorporate elements of *Mek Mulung* can lead to further interest in wanting to know more about *Mek Mulung* itself.

Through various experiments which have involved breaking away from the formal performance structures of *Mek Mulung*, a different and new appreciation of the tradition has developed as well as accessibility to a more diverse audience. These new and creative forms, if recognized and given new labels, may be dissociated from the main core performance. These spin-offs can even allow greater creativity by breaking away from the need to be confined to the cultural sensitivity bounded by the customs of the *Mek Mulung* identity. Generally, to date, three separate forms of *Mek Mulung* performances styles can be identified: (1) the village-based traditional *Mek Mulung* performance of Wang Tepus, (2) the concertized version of *Mek Mulung* performed outside of Wang Tepus, and (3) novel *Mek Mulung*-inspired performances. The inevitability of interactions between stable and malleable elements as put forth by Harris (2017), discussed earlier in Section 6.1, to

ensure resiliency in the performing arts, can lead to the possibility of the *Mek Mulung* village performance picking up more elements of the concertized version, and the concertized *Mek Mulung* envisioning itself becoming more like the village version, but still maintaining a clear distinction between the two. The village performance will never discard the *tiang seri* as part of its prop in the *bangsal* (see section 2.6.1 in Chapter Two). The concertized performance will most likely continue with its incomplete Bertabik song (see section 3.4.2 in Chapter Three). The extent to which these stable and malleable elements change, along with technological advancement, will determine the speed and form of the new *Mek Mulung* product. On the other hand, it can move in the opposite direction or appear static, but I do not foresee this as a strong potential outcome.

Efforts to “contemporarize” or “modernize” traditional performance have brought out critics concerned with the issue of authenticity in the new performance product. Creative movements derived from traditional performances developed into new forms of performance which are separate and different from its traditional origin. These new creations provide variety to traditional performances like *Mek Mulung*. An important point to emphasize is that creative changes in performance forms are occurring constantly. The rate at which they take place depend on the enthusiasm of an individual, group, or organization to make changes in the performances, as well as differing according to whether changes concern village performances taking place in Wang Tepus, or concertized performances in urban contexts, or more recently and actively through various *Mek Mulung*-inspired products that are expressed or applied in a variety of contexts.

New performance ideas taking place in new spaces can spark lively discussions of *Mek Mulung* among new and existing audiences that can lead to the emergence of more relevant and contemporary themes. Artistes without proper *Mek Mulung* training as well



as those who are well-informed about *Mek Mulung* can proceed with their creative projects, thus contributing to a spectrum of interpretations for *Mek Mulung*. Here, we can see the extent to which artists, such as Zamzuriah develop their pieces, taking into consideration elements of cultural sensitivity, cultural respect, and other elements proposed by Norzizi at the beginning of this chapter. These new art forms now transmit the artists' knowledge about *Mek Mulung* in these pieces to the audiences.

Apart from the performance of the *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik*, most of the experiments in *Mek Mulung* performances have been planned, developed, and implemented without the knowledge of, nor seeking the opinion from, the holders of the tradition. This is perhaps the only performance that fulfills the criteria of Norzizi's all five key practices for intercultural creativity whilst working within the established boundaries of the stable and malleable elements of *Mek Mulung*. The inclusivity and transparency between the young and older generation creating new material is an excellent model to implement for future creative traditional staging not just for *Mek Mulung*.

Recent creative experiments with the *Mek Mulung* performance has brought vibrancy to *Mek Mulung* within urban spaces, where it has come to exist separately in the form of a new contemporary product making use of various themes derived from *Mek Mulung* in a variety of ways. It is true, to a certain extent that the community of Wang Tepus does not show interest in having the *Mek Mulung* tradition continue in their village through the requisite practice of ensuring certain performances are carried out from time to time.<sup>167</sup> Perhaps giving them the assurance that they have rightful ownership to the urban forms of *Mek Mulung* would allow the form to reclaim its significance to the village and the community. Although collaboration will not necessarily be feasible to certain

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<sup>167</sup> Interview with villagers taken at random, 9 August, 2018.

creative works, however, cultural respect that leads to mutual respect to contribute back to the inspirations that helped us in the first place. Performances outside of the village context have been shown to contribute to the vitality of *Mek Mulung*; however, these positive effects do not get transferred or carried over towards the vitality of *Mek Mulung* performance within the village context. This may help explain the continuing indifferent, or even negative, attitude of the villagers towards having *Mek Mulung* return to its traditional home in the village of Wang Tepus.

*Mek Mulung* projects championed by Zamzuriah have mostly included consultations with and inclusion of the Wang Tepus practitioners as part of the creative process. This is why performance integrity of her work often reflect the communications that she has with the cultural bearers. Others prefer to work independently and present their own interpretations. While these can offer greater variety to the performances, and provide added value to the traditional arts scene, the type of projects, performances, and activism represented by Zamzuriah's work appear to be the most culturally appropriate route for *Mek Mulung* getting appropriate recognition, greater media coverage, and wider audience acceptance. Zamzuriah has a dedicated fan base following her successful solo performances in *Jalan Primadona* and *Section by Stesen*, and her recent production and directing of *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik*, which garnered sold-out audiences for three consecutive nights ('Sambutan Luar Biasa', 2018). Interviews with members of the audience during the *Mek Mulung* performances revealed that many of them knew about Zamzuriah's work with *Mek Mulung* and were more than happy to support her.

Innovative performances have been shown to spark interest and help promote dynamism in various arts spheres. However, *Mek Mulung* may not be fortunate enough to have the same opportunities. Thus, among the many important things that Zamzuriah

hopes to achieve is to establish a convergence of the village performers from Wang Tepus and the urban performers, where they can engage in creative dialogues to come up with suggestions and strategies to promote viability, vitality, and vibrancy of performances in their respective contexts, while at the same time ensuring the integrity of the tradition and feelings of respect for one another.

Technological advancements offer opportunities towards innovations that can help *Mek Mulung* reach its fullest potential. Virtual communities created through internet media platforms are sources which can be translated into real audiences (Um, 2013, pp. 204-205). New modes of consumption enable creative performances to continue making an impact on *Mek Mulung*. The energized *Mek Mulung* hopefully can provide the needed push for the Wang Tepus community to band themselves to reclaim ownership of *Mek Mulung* and make an impact towards sustaining *Mek Mulung* from their own status and perspective.

It is true that to a certain extent part of the community do not show interest and enthusiasm in having the *Mek Mulung* tradition continue in their village through the requisite practice of ensuring performances are carried out from time to time. But it is worth to remember that the performers of Wang Tepus are poor, the majority having an average monthly income of about RM800 (Malaysian Ringgit)<sup>168</sup> (about 150 British Pounds) while cost of living continues to rise. Most of them are in their middle ages and many do not have the energy to be enthusiastic and actively involved in making performances which appear to be losing its importance in the village. Perhaps, giving them some rightful ownership to the popular urban *Mek Mulung* can give them a means to

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<sup>168</sup> This figure was made available by a representative from the Ministry of Agriculture at the Paddy section of the Malaysian Association of Horticulture and Agrotourism exhibition on 2 December 2018, referring to paddy farmers in Kedah. Pak Saad's daughter, Nurul, works as a server at a restaurant and earns 40 Ringgit per day which is equivalent to how much a paddy farmer makes in a month as compared to what she makes if she works five days a week.

reclaim *Mek Mulung*'s significance to the traditional bearers, the village, and the community.

## Chapter 7

### Summary and Conclusion

#### 7.1 Introduction

The objective of this study was to analyse the development of the *Mek Mulung* music-drama native to the state of Kedah in peninsular Malaysia, from the earliest records of its formation to the multiple variations it has evolved into today. I have discerned three main distinct performance varieties that have developed through this process over time, namely: the original *Mek Mulung* as performed in Wang Tepus; the urban concertized version; and the modern creative performances inspired from *Mek Mulung* elements. In my Masters dissertation I compared the urban and village performing structures as they were five years ago (Nur Izzati, 2014). Since its declaration in 2014 as a Kedah state heritage, there have been many efforts by individuals, groups and organizations to increase awareness about *Mek Mulung*'s existence and its special role within the Wang Tepus community; to promote its staging in the village and especially outside the village in its concertized version; and more recently, to introduce a variety of creative and innovative ideas which have transpired from its elements.

This chapter aims to summarise the arguments made in this thesis, to reassess the significance of recent developments in *Mek Mulung* and its multiple identity pathways to the present time. This is then followed by a set of policy recommendations to be presented to the government for implementation by appropriate governmental agencies as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in collaboration with intangible

heritage activities. Among these are the National Heritage Department, the State Department of Arts and Culture, and NGOs such as AKRAB and PUSAKA.<sup>169</sup>

## 7.2 Summary

Azhar Ibrahim (2017) in the introduction of his latest book, *Historical Imagination and Cultural Responses to Colonialism and Nationalism: A Malay(sian) Perspective*, quotes George Orwell (2005) who states that, “Who controls the past controls the future. And who controls the present controls the past” (Azhar, 2017, p. 1). I opened this thesis with a discussion of the traces of *Mek Mulung* within historical sources. The documentation I gathered through archival sources and oral history provide a more solid understanding of the extent to which *Mek Mulung* was important in the past, and also the traces historical *Mek Mulung* performances have left in the memories of the current practitioners. Many of the events that historical archival sources portray happened generations ago, beyond the reach of memory of the current generation. I have tried to analyse events and memories in tandem in order to understand the identity and importance *Mek Mulung* had in both history and memory.

The sixth and seventh generation of performers are now the current holders of the *Mek Mulung* traditions in Wang Tepus; but much past knowledge has been forgotten due to diminishing interest in the form locally. What remains in memory are glorious events that lead back to those golden days of the performance. Throughout my inquiry into the historical positioning of *Mek Mulung*, I suggested that “historical imagination” (Freire, 1970; Azhar, 2017) was in play: that is, the contemporary interpretation of a historical

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<sup>169</sup> PUSAKA is an organization that aims to provide strategies to help document and strengthen local performing arts. The name PUSAKA is not an acronym but means ‘inheritance’.

narrative often explains more about how the community perceive themselves within that historical trajectory, thus providing its meaning. Azhar explains further that:

Historical imagination is an intellectual inquiry blended with engagement in the predicament or community or nation where the intellectual lives. At the same time, this historical imagination arouses interest in history, generally seeing it as vital knowledge that can awaken our consciousness, alongside a commitment for our people and nation. (2017, p. 3)

This is highly relevant to the sustainability of *Mek Mulung*. Knowledge of the development of Kedah's culture and entertainment from earlier periods provides evidence of the development of certain tastes and aesthetics in the past, but can also inform future developments.

My analysis of *Mek Mulung*'s "historical imagination" in Chapter Two uses archival materials and oral histories collected during my own fieldwork within Wang Tepus as well as raw data collected by Zamzuriah (2009), personal collections from Coulliard (1980), and academic reports by Ku Zam Zam (1978), and Zaleha (1975) over a forty-year timespan that includes two generations of the Wang Tepus performers. This oral evidence may be considered "cultural documents" recorded over different periods that enable us to understand the changes in the social, cultural and economic history of *Mek Mulung* (Azhar, 2017, p. 20). In turn, this thesis will become a document providing further evidence of *Mek Mulung*'s history. Not only it is important to discuss what has been archived, it is also important to consider that both archives and the histories made from them are selective and to consider details and events that might have been left out of the record (Zinn, 2001).

Although records show that notable historian R. O. Winsteadt was in the amusement committee during the 1922 Borneo Malaya Exhibition, where *Mek Mulung*

was performed, there were no written reports providing any details. Skeat (1900) also mentions *Mek Mulung* in his book, *Malay Magic*, but mostly discusses *Mak Yong*, another traditional Malay dance-drama. Written histories therefore have not favoured *Mek Mulung*, but other historical events within the same timeline can help to uncover some truths or rationalize the myths that are associated with *Mek Mulung*. One such truth that has yet to be proven is solid evidence that *Mek Mulung* has been around for more than 400 or 500 years. Therefore, it is not known whether a *Mek Mulung* performance then possessed the characteristics or forms seen in current performances.

Chapter Three explores the development of *Mek Mulung* from a village tradition to an urban concertized form, focussing on the current generation performing outside of the village (Mohd Ibrahim, 1996). In the beginning of this process, the Wang Tepus practitioners themselves were the agents of change when they performed outside of their local traditional *bangsal*. These performances created changes in the relationship between the performers and the audience. From their active and participatory roles in the *Mek Mulung* village version, audience in the *Mek Mulung* concertized performances have become passive as mere spectators. In 2002 when *Mek Mulung* was picked to be one of the forms performed by the urban–elite PPAG, the form drew the attention of traditional arts enthusiasts in Kuala Lumpur, and was transformed into a new variety of traditional dance drama, one reconstructed and performed for an urban audience.

This new trend was picked up by a number of performing arts groups in the urban scene. Although selected Wang Tepus practitioners were responsible for training the first PPAG performers, the urban performance of *Mek Mulung* itself mainly consisted of professionals unfamiliar with Kedah or Wang Tepus. The rising popularity of *Mek Mulung* during the period of PPAG's experiments sparked discussion within academic institutions.



This then encouraged ASWARA, a major performing arts teaching institution, to make *Mek Mulung* performance a core subject in one of its curricula. The performer and activist Zamzuriah learned about *Mek Mulung* as an academic faculty at ASWARA, and was sent to Wang Tepus herself in 2009, where she learnt first-hand with the late Pak Leh, a prominent *Mek Mulung* dancer in Wang Tepus. Zamzuriah then realised through her direct encounters with the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* that the PPAG performance differed from the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* that she was learning from Pak Leh. Her role as a researcher-activist and academician within ASWARA allowed her, in collaboration with Wang Tepus practitioners, to adjust the performance style that had been popularized by the PPAG towards a performance style that she feels better reflects the performance of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*.

Academic institutions such as ASWARA and Universiti Malaya now provide a platform for *Mek Mulung* in which students and staff-practitioners can experiment with the different styles of the performance, without the pressure of making returns from ticket sales. Novel reworkings of *Mek Mulung* can thus be done in a safe space that, crucially, includes regular input from the traditional performers of Wang Tepus. These opportunities enable *Mek Mulung* to be explored by urban audiences without the need to comply with the aesthetic of “Western splendour” that is expected of commercialized performances, such as those put on by the PPAG. Even with all of the styles of *Mek Mulung* now being regularly staged on various platforms, there is still reason to doubt how much the audience understand the form. Most of the *Mek Mulung* performances are done for audiences outside of Wang Tepus, and there is very little information on how far the differences between the rural and urban forms are understood by these new audiences.

Digital consumption through the internet becomes the main means of learning about *Mek Mulung* for the curious, who may assume that the popular urban version is the “real” or “true” version. It is unclear that the connection with Wang Tepus has penetrated the consciousness of consumers of the urban concertized form. In particular, the concertized version of *Mek Mulung* is designed to be palatable to the uninformed audience, rather than to maintain the integrity of the original village form. The lack of access to information about *Mek Mulung* and its origins in Wang Tepus has made it easier to identify *Mek Mulung* simply as “theatre from Kedah”. An example is an amateur performance (WazuWardi, 2017) that uses the name *Mek Mulung*. The performance not only does not use the *Mek Mulung* songs and its storyline, it also does not adhere to the performance structure conventions. It uses the characters, the *Raja*, *Puteri*, *Awang* and *Inang*; and performs it in the Kedah dialect. The key *Mek Mulung* identity markers, including its performance structures, mandatory musical phrases, songs and dance movements, have all been ignored.

In 2014, when *Mek Mulung* was declared as a Kedah State heritage, it began to gain more attention from stakeholders in Malaysia’s traditional arts. The following year, Pak Saad was declared a “National Heritage Living People” or *Warisan Kebangsaan Orang Hidup* (WAKOH) (Hafizah, 2017). In Chapter Four, I examined how *Mek Mulung*, a performance form that is declining within its own community, has now been given a boost through heritage status, and has begun to be appreciated nationwide outside of Wang Tepus. Festivals and JKKN Kedah’s *Mek Mulung* tours (‘Six states to see *Mek Mulong*’, 2012) now travel across Malaysia to promote the performance form as a Kedah heritage. Just during the period of my doctoral studies (2015 – 18), heritage status has changed its

image rapidly from an overlooked and unimportant form to one now that is celebrated and identified as integral to national cultural identity.

Although the village and the urban concertized forms are both labelled as *Mek Mulung*, the styles are distinct. The village form of *Mek Mulung* remains in Wang Tepus; it is the urban concertized form that has largely been promoted outside of Wang Tepus as *Mek Mulung*. Previous negative connotations with *Mek Mulung* (Mohd Ibrahim, 1996; Wartawan Kita, 1988), most particularly associating it with pre-Islamic rituals, have been left behind. The establishment of state heritage status has resulted in *Mek Mulung* becoming more popular and performed more widely on various stages, festivals, and competitions by a number of professional and amateur performers as well as university and school students. The *Mek Mulung* that has been repeatedly performed is the one identified as the reconstructed urban *Mek Mulung* performance. This shift has resulted in what I noted in Chapter Four an invented tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2012). The growing patronage of urban audiences and their adoption of the urban form as their idea of how *Mek Mulung* should ideally be presented, complements what the JKKN Kedah and other governmental agencies are promoting as the true *Mek Mulung*—void of all the rituals and narrative deemed un-Islamic that were in the original Wang Tepus performance.

This increasing identification of *Mek Mulung* with the “disenchanted” urban form means that the urban form is the one that the Heritage agencies have, quite inaccurately, adopted as representing the *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus, such as the JKKN’s *Mek Mulung* performance tour mentioned in Chapter Three. Brief introductions during performances sometimes mention Wang Tepus as the source of origin for *Mek Mulung*, but this association is more often neglected. The original holders of the tradition are often uncredited. That more and more performances of *Mek Mulung* are presented in this

manner has, ironically, exacerbated the fact that even though *Mek Mulung* is nationally performed more frequently, there has so far been no concerted effort to revive or help revitalize the performance troupe in Wang Tepus. The troupe members have been left behind to decline, with several of their members aging and passing away, and their children and grandchildren leaving the village to seek employment in neighboring towns/cities.

To understand the difference between urban audiences and those in Wang Tepus, Chapter Five discusses the fieldwork I undertook to understand the expectations and the motivations of audiences that attend *Mek Mulung* performances, as well as how much they know about the relationship between the urban and the Wang Tepus versions. The urban performances now attract multi-ethnic audiences, including a few foreign nationals.<sup>170</sup> The majority of the audience of the urban performance perceive it as entertaining, but are unaware of its specific *kampung* Wang Tepus origins. Nonetheless, for those who could identify it having originated from Kedah based on the dialect used by the performers, they still have problems making sense of the song lyrics. Thus, they can hear words being sung, but unable to decipher what these words meant. In interviews with eight respondents who attended the performance on 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> August 2018 of the staging of *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik*, these audience members stated that they could not understand the lyrics of the songs, which made no sense to them. However, they all mentioned that the exciting and entertaining nature of this theatrical form made them keen to attend more *Mek Mulung* performances.

Although the form and its meanings are already reinterpreted by the artistic directors within an urban context, new meanings also emerged from the gazes of the

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<sup>170</sup> On the opening night of *Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik* on the 17<sup>th</sup> August 2018, 35 Japanese exchange students from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia attended the performance.

audiences (O'Reilly, Larsen & Kubaki, 2016). The reconstruction of the urban *Mek Mulung* was designed to suit the new audience, and secondarily to increase the vitality of the village *Mek Mulung* beyond Wang Tepus. Artistic directors must be better informed on the performative and stylistic structure of the village form as without it, the urban form risks falling into a homogenized theatre stage style, or even coming to resemble another theatre genre (Mohd Ghouse, 2015). Due to the lack of knowledge about *Mek Mulung*, open access to these performances through online sources such as YouTube, recorded negative and hostile comments towards the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung*. In contrast, concertized *Mek Mulung* performances sparked interest and received positive remarks. Convenient and free access to *Mek Mulung* videos provide easy access to interested individuals that without proper introduction and knowledge lead them to their own understanding of *Mek Mulung* which perhaps may cause them to lose interest and maybe develop a negative attitude and hatred towards the village version. These multiple audiences who are not from Wang Tepus have multiple understandings and perceptions of “what” *Mek Mulung* is and different conclusions were derived based on the material they are exposed to and “how” these are comprehended.

Within Wang Tepus village, the audience members that I have had conversations with, within about a kilometre of the *bangsal* or Pak Saad's house, revealed that although they had grown up watching the performance regularly, they are indifferent to the prospects of it being actively performed in the *kampung* today. The annual *Sembah Guru* has not been performed for several years, and with the accessibility of other forms of entertainment, especially TV and internet, and better modes of travel, this traditional entertainment has now lost its importance within the *kampung*. Without ongoing support of the community, it will be very difficult for *Mek Mulung* to be sustained within Wang

Tepus. The question for policy then might be how to encourage the community to maintain the traditional form.

With the popularity of *Mek Mulung* on the rise since 2014, Chapter Six discusses the emergence of new creative performances involving *Mek Mulung* as a key reference across a wide range of venues. By expanding *Mek Mulung*'s presence in multiple arenas, there is potential for a wider spectrum of audiences to enjoy and be inspired by *Mek Mulung* performances in other platforms including dance, contemporary theatre, film and television, and material commodities. These fields have overlapping audiences, thus potentially expanding interest to audiences that may not necessarily be or have been interested in *Mek Mulung* as a dance-drama performance. Presenting hybrid or contemporary performance that includes *Mek Mulung* themes such as Zamzuriah's *Jalan Primadona* and RTM1 *Mai Chek Mai* on television are some of the many way artists can introduce *Mek Mulung* to different audiences. These groups of people, which may be unfamiliar with *Mek Mulung* as a distinct form, may become more informed about *Mek Mulung* and show further interest.

Whilst researcher-activist performances and the restaging of *Mek Mulung* within an urban context continue within the traditional performing arts scene, there is an ongoing need to restore a healthy balance between the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* and performances outside of Wang Tepus. Urban performance should be able to contribute to the vitality and viability of the performance in Wang Tepus. Integrated performances that include *Mek Mulung* performers of Wang Tepus possess the potential to increase villagers' pride in the form, which they have lost with the decline of interest within the *kampung*. Inclusion in creative decision making can prevent them from feeling excluded or deceived while urban performances are commercializing *Mek Mulung*.

### 7.3 Discussions and Conclusions

Malaysia is currently at a political crossroad. The recent General Election of 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018 saw the previous coalition, *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), which has been in power since the nation's independence in 1957, replaced by a new coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope). In the euphoric atmosphere of *Malaysia Baharu* (New Malaysia) there is now hope for greater economic and cultural development, and greater political transparency to build a more sustainable and safer nation. This political sea change is the outcome of the nation's outcry over the infamous One Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal and other alleged financial irregularities by the previous government, which has put the government of Malaysia one trillion Malaysian Ringgit (RM), or approximately £185 billion, in debt. While the change of government is good news to Malaysians, the revelation of Malaysia's huge debt means that there will be limited funds that can be channelled towards the arts during the course of the re-development of Malaysia (Danial, 2018). However, there is a positive outcome from this change of political rule. The new government encourages the *rakyat* or people to provide constructive feedback and critiques to improve their services without fear of censorship, an action that was prohibited by the previous government including the various forms of protest art.<sup>171</sup> This means that artists have more room now to express themselves through art without the fear of being prosecuted in the name of insulting the government. There are no specific indications of lifting certain religious censorship guidelines relating to performing arts, such as complete freedom for inclusion of ritual elements in

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<sup>171</sup> A dance critique was arrested during the 2015 KL DiverCity Arts festival for throwing yellow balloons with the words "Justice", "Free Media" and "Democracy" aimed at former Prime Minister Najib Razak. In 2017, several artists' products were pulled out from the KL Biennale due to censorship complaints.

performances. However, the government has responded to various issues which require a review of the role of the Department of Islamic Development Malaysia or JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) which enforces religious policing.<sup>172</sup>

Within these changing and uncertain transitional times, it is important to look at *Mek Mulung* at a more macro level and how this tradition now interacts within a larger network of systems. Anthony Seeger (2016), in Schippers and Grant (2016), notes that musical “ecologies”, a term borrowed from ecology studies by Jeff Titon in 1992, 2009, and 2008-2016, have returned as a strategic mode of researching musical communities and their movements and relations within the dynamics of society. Huib Schippers’ (2016) emphasis on Jeff Titon’s ecological approach to study music cultures which he developed from 25 years of research linking ecological understanding and issues of music sustainability is highlighted by Anthony Seeger in the Foreword section of Schippers and Grant:

The important thing to study to understand how music cultures are sustained is not primarily the structures of their sounds but rather the way the traditions are part of a larger conceptual, physical, and mediated environment of actions and values, resources and regulations, individual and communities, power and hegemony, and market and media (Schippers & Grant, 2016, p. ix).

In this thesis, I have extensively analysed and discussed relations between the two main performance forms of *Mek Mulung* and their complex relationships with the various agencies and artistic communities engaged with them. These changing modes of interactions between agencies, artistic establishments, and the performers of Wang Tepus provide the dynamic forces that form the ecology in which *Mek Mulung* exists and which

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<sup>172</sup> The government is reviewing the large funds that are channeled to this agency. For example, JAKIM conducts raids and is authorized to arrest Muslims who are caught for *khalwat* (unmarried couple found in close proximity in private situations), and other wrongdoings which are prosecuted under Islamic laws.



has led to its expansion beyond the village domain. The rapid developments discussed in Chapters Three and Four have ultimately popularized *Mek Mulung* outside of Wang Tepus, largely thanks to, and in the form of, the reconstructed urban concertized performance (Nur Izzati, 2014). These performances outside of Wang Tepus now give access to audiences that would previously never have been exposed to *Mek Mulung*. The developing awareness of multiple versions of *Mek Mulung*, which this thesis aims to contribute substantially, should raise consciousness not only of the fragility of its sustainability within the village performance setting, but also how the Wang Tepus practitioners should be primary beneficiaries of *Mek Mulung* performances and pedagogy outside of Wang Tepus.

Sustainability, in this case, has to engage with a debate on the different forms of *Mek Mulung* that asks which version we are trying to preserve (Schippers, 2016): the rural Wang Tepus format, the more popular urban entertainment version, or something else. Although the urban concertized performance is modelled on the performance of Wang Tepus, the form draws audiences tenfold in number compared with the performance of traditional *Mek Mulung*, and does very little to benefit the holders of the tradition. With changing patterns of leisure (Archer, 1964) and cheaper forms of media entertainment, the village community has found few reasons to keep *Mek Mulung* alive. In other words, *Mek Mulung* has lost its resiliency throughout the years, confining it to the performing members of the troupe and their direct families. By analysing the failing and resilient elements within the performance of Wang Tepus, strategies to improve the ecology of the *Mek Mulung* rural community will be the main discussion in this concluding chapter. In what follows, I hope to suggest solutions and policy recommendations for the revitalisation and sustainability of *Mek Mulung* in both its rural and urban forms.

Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy (2012) in their book *Resilience* identified patterns of resilience that work across ecosystems to determine factors that reduce potential crisis and allow quick recovery to failing mechanisms. If a system or ecology sensors is breached, “a resilient system will be able to ensure continuity by dynamically reorganizing both the way in which it serves its purpose and the scale at which it operates” (Zolli & Healy, 2012, p.13). In Chapters Two and Six, I suggested that *Mek Mulung* continues to exist because of its ability to adapt its performance style to suit the conditions of the performing group and its audience. Because of a lack of female performers at certain points in time, men played both male and female roles. Actors who can act but cannot sing can still perform, but their singing parts are taken over by other performers seated in the chorus. This reveals the existence in *Mek Mulung* of what Robin Harris (2017) calls “stable and malleable” elements, which suggests an inherent resilience in the form. Previously, I have used Harris’s theory to show that these elements allowed the emergence of the contemporary urban form while maintaining and preserving some kind of a *Mek Mulung* identity. In Wang Tepus, the malleable elements help to dynamically reorganize the performing group, to adapt to changing circumstances. Its stable elements on the other hand maintain the main core identity to allow the practice to survive with integrity intact until today.

What factors have undermined *Mek Mulung*’s resilience in the Wang Tepus context? The Green Revolution of the 1980s enabled wet rice farming to be done twice a year from a single yearly crop, thus reducing farmers’ leisure time (Scott, 1985); the use of harvesting machines meant that less labour is needed in the fields as compared to the traditional manual harvesting technique. Influences from the Iranian Islamic Revolution for the most part, besides other less contributory foreign influences (Mohamad, 1991)

brought changes that have some impact on Islamic viewpoints and practices among the Muslim-majority rural population. But it has been technological access and rapid digital globalization that have been the larger forces impeding *Mek Mulung*'s resilience within Wang Tepus in the present time. The current generation of performers argue that the 1980s were the heyday of *Mek Mulung* performances in Wang Tepus. This is partly because of the greatness of a single individual—they believe that Pak Taib was one of the best leaders they have ever had.<sup>173</sup> This aspect of resilience resembles Zolli & Healy's phenomenon of "translational leaders", who "play a critical role, frequently behind the scenes, connecting constituencies, and weaving various networks, perspectives, knowledge systems, and agendas into a coherent whole. In this process, these leaders promote adaptive governance" (2012, p. 20). During Pak Taib's period, the performers say they performed and travelled outside of the *kampung* the most. From the performers' perspective, Pak Taib organized the group well to suit the group's interest and bring the group members together.

Diversity, adaptability to change and the power of translational leaders are some of the main reasons for resiliency (Schippers, 2016; Zolli & Healy, 2012) in most ecologies. While adaptability to change means that *Mek Mulung* in the village maintained its resiliency in the past, the rate and type of change in the present times has been too strong to sustain its relevancy within the Wang Tepus community. *Mek Mulung* currently has no systematic transmission process, and the current generation do not have the breadth of knowledge of its predecessors, like the late Pak Leh and the late Pak Taib. The village community itself is not entirely supportive of the performance due to the rise in a more Islamic outlook and revival of Islamic sentiments (Mohamad, 1991) resulting from

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<sup>173</sup> Interview with Pak Awie on the 1st May 2017 at his residence.

increasing influences of Islamic resurgence around the world. This can be seen from comments made by the villagers as shown in section 5.2.4 in Chapter Five indicating that they are “not interested”. The members of the current troupe themselves do not seek to improve their appeal to the younger generations within Wang Tepus. With that in mind, it seems almost impossible that *Mek Mulung* will survive in Wang Tepus without outside help. The troupe, however, is now opening up and encouraging the involvement of selected individuals whom they believe have shown interest and commitment, such as Zamzuriah and her husband Kamarul Baisah, to come and perform with them in the village, and to learn the closely guarded rituals that previously were only taught exclusively to individuals of the *Mek Mulung* lineage.<sup>174</sup> This innovation in transmission seems a positive and adaptable response to current threats.

The *Mek Mulung* performance within the urban context continues to be widely performed and shows no signs of diminishing in popularity. The Wang Tepus village performance on the other hand is in dire need of external financial aid and effective advice in the area of traditional-arts management. Its physical performance infrastructure, the *bangsal*, the performance space, and the instruments cannot currently be fully maintained due to lack of funds. Interested individuals within the *kampung* do not have proper access or means to learn from the current performers. At times, the performers need to be persuaded to teach. The main challenge is to convince the village community that *Mek Mulung* is important to the people of Wang Tepus. A supportive community can help ensure *Mek Mulung*’s resiliency and give the community as a whole the pride that their village possesses a unique dance-drama which is declared State Heritage.

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<sup>174</sup> Kamarul Baisah went through the ritual conducted by Pak Saad at Wang Tepus on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2018.

A holistic approach (Dunbar-Hall, 2016; Zolli & Healy, 2012) in the case of maintaining *Mek Mulung* at this present age requires contributions from external forces apart from the performers themselves to reach a point of equilibrium for them to be independent within their self-regulating ecologies. In order to reach these goals, support from the state, non-governmental agencies, private sector and even researchers are needed to come together to help in sustaining a performance of a rural community.

#### **7.4 Recommendations**

The following section outlines several recommendations to improve the vitality of *Mek Mulung* within Wang Tepus and considers how urban performances can give back to the village performance form. These recommendations will also provide a model to frame a “best practice” approach for the management of traditional performing arts, mainly within the Malaysian rural context, and where the performers themselves do not have proper access or training in management. These recommendations are idealistic suggestions that can be carried out with proper negotiations with the tradition bearers. In the *Mek Mulung* case, some of the ideas can be implemented by researchers; others can be researcher-led but implemented by various appropriate agencies such as JKKN as well as other organizations having the necessary resources.

A key recommendation that can benefit the *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus is to have the group registered as a formal not-for-profit community society or organization. The organization will be registered under the Registration of Society legislation governed by federal laws under the Societies Act of 1966. As a formal organization, it will have its own rules and regulations, and proper records of its activities and finances. Societies/organizations have their own bank accounts and must hold regular meetings

where minutes are recorded. This will give the external funds previously made directly to Pak Saad, the leader of the group, transparency to both the *Mek Mulung* performers and the funders. All funding and donations will go through the treasurer, who will be legally responsible to inform the members on the debit and credit balances of their society. As of the end of 2018, a formal group discussion with the members of the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* troupe has decided to form a society. The group will elect its committee members, and there will also be external members, for example Zamzuriah and I. The committee will have oversight over the group's progress and sustainability, liaise with other organizations, and make proposals to apply for external funding. At the moment, what is holding them back from forming the society is to have an external member to serve as an adviser to help mitigate issues within the group as well as to liaise with other agencies. Both Zamzuriah and I are candidates for this position; however, our work commitments in Kuala Lumpur pose some difficulties to commit fully towards the society, especially having to make decisions remotely. We are looking into suitable solutions to this predicament so that the society can get established and represent the group for better opportunities to apply for grants and access to funding which can ensure the stability and success of the group.

As a society the group gains greater longevity and stability that does not rely on particular individuals, and grant applications are more successful as an organized unit. The group will also gain wider exposure and expertise from external management and technical support and training.

The second recommendation is to build a strong virtual community through websites and social media, something that has already seen success in the case of the

*Wayang Kulit Sri Asun* puppeteer, the late Pak Majid (see discussion in Chapter Six).<sup>175</sup>

A website providing key information on the *Mek Mulung* of Wang Tepus, and built and managed by the society will provide a virtual platform for the group and make it easier for the wider community, as well as potential donors and grant award committees, to interact and communicate with the performers. This will probably require the identification of local volunteers (or grant-funded staff) with the requisite web skills to build the website, and the identification of individuals in the community or among the performers who can be trained to update and maintain the website. Again, the society can maintain continuity here, perhaps by ensuring that the individual responsible for web maintenance and updates is a statutory member of the committee.

While the website will provide the core general portal for the society, other social media platforms will be integrated to create a dynamic virtual *Mek Mulung* space. Within this active space, the public can share their views and the Wang Tepus performers respond, allowing the public to interact informally with the group. This virtual community will give access to a potentially international audience, in turn increasing the profile of *Mek Mulung* at home, including in the village community.

A third recommendation is to build a permanent structure to double as a *bangsal* for performances and to host the society. As it stands, the *bangsal*, although it appears like a temporary structure in the past, according to Abang Mat it is in practice a semi-permanent structure that is repaired for use for the following year's performance.<sup>176</sup> For that reason, it is a logical extension to make the *bangsal* into a permanent structure with lasting materials. The Wang Tepus performers are currently raising funds to build this new

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<sup>175</sup> <http://pakmajid.weebly.com/>. After Pak Majid's death in 2016, the website was not maintained or updated.

<sup>176</sup> Personal conversation with Abang Mat in his residence on the 9<sup>th</sup> August 2018

*bangsal*.<sup>177</sup> The proposed *bangsal* can become a small community space where other activities can be held as well as *Mek Mulung* performances. The space can encourage better community engagement with *Mek Mulung*, and act as a small gallery or museum where information about *Mek Mulung* can be stored. The space can, for example, be modelled after Pak Dain's *Wayang Kulit Kelantan* Gallery, as discussed in Chapter Four, where a series of engagements with state-sponsored tourism activities bring people to learn and have hands-on experiences of *Wayang Kulit*.<sup>178</sup> The tourist/museum model has also been very successful in India, especially where the initiative comes from the performers themselves; the *sattriya* dancers of Majuli Island in Assam studied by Georgie Pope is one example.<sup>179</sup> After the society is established, the *bangsal* or the building will become part of the society's assets.

With the establishment of the society and a space to perform, the fourth recommendation is to provide a safe space for multiple-age groups to learn the *Mek Mulung* tradition, particularly among children. One of the society's key aims is to improve the transmission process of *Mek Mulung* among future generations by training interested people, especially younger people.

A fifth recommendation is to use the society as a way to bring together, develop an archive, and improve access to previous recordings and archival materials relating to *Mek Mulung* for the Wang Tepus group. Some of the archived recordings of performances are not in the possession of the performers; these include the Universiti Sains Malaysia's recording which is deposited in its Ethnographic Video Instruction Analysis Digital

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<sup>177</sup> Personal conversation with Zamzuriah on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 2018. A workshop was held on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018 to raise funds for the construction of the *bangsal*.

<sup>178</sup> As mentioned in previous chapters, tourists will be able to view puppets, try their hand on making puppets and watch a live *Wayang Kulit* show.

<sup>179</sup> For website that links George Pope's project Sound Travels: <https://soundtravelsindia.com/about/> (Accessed on 1 April 2019).



Archive (EVIADA), that maintains recorded performances in the 1980s, photographs by Marie Andrée Coulliard in 1980s, and raw footage by the National Museum published in 2002. The new *Mek Mulung* society can request and obtain records by researchers and national, state and private institutions for local stakeholders to access. With this, they can eventually build their own archive to share with the community, researchers, and the wider world.

A sixth is to bridge the gap between the urban form of *Mek Mulung* and the Wang Tepus form by promoting various collaborations between them. An example of good practice is the collaborative performances promoted by Zamzuriah, such as the 2016 performance of *Mek Mulung Dewa Kaca* and the 2018 performance of *Mek Mulung Hikayat Puteri Dua Belas Beradik* whereby Wang Tepus performers were invited to perform with the urban performers; these exhibited a unique blend of old and new in one single performance. Collaborative performance on the basis of equality will not only improve the standing of the performers of Wang Tepus, it will also improve the visibility of Wang Tepus performers to the audiences that already enjoy *Mek Mulung* outside of Wang Tepus. Increasing the opportunity of the village performers to perform on different stages will also increase the value of the village form to the community, thus encouraging them to revitalize and preserve *Mek Mulung* within the *kampung*,

Another method to bridge the gap is to get urban performers to perform in Wang Tepus. Until very recently, the *Mek Mulung* community was against outsiders performing in their *kampung*.<sup>180</sup> After Zamzuriah's husband was invited to come to Wang Tepus to receive the *Buka Panggung* knowledge,<sup>181</sup> Pak Saad told them they are now open to

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<sup>180</sup> Personal conversation with Zamzuriah and Kamarul Baisah during the *Mek Mulung* workshop on the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018.

<sup>181</sup> *Buka Panggung* is a ritual that only certain individuals such as Pak Saad are able to perform. It consists of verses of mantras that are recited in private places before the *Mek Mulung* starts. The knowledge of a *Buka Panggung* or *ilmu buka panggung* can only be done on a Tuesday. Kamarul Baisah received it on a Tuesday, 4<sup>th</sup> September 2018.

receive Zamzuriah's students and allow them to perform in Wang Tepus with the village performers. This suggests the performers within Wang Tepus have publicly implied that they no longer restrict their performance space. Pak Saad's daughter, Nurul, once asked me, "Why hasn't Kak Zam (Zamzuriah) bring her ASWARA students to perform with us in the *bangsal* yet?"<sup>182</sup> I have responded at that time that the students have other responsibilities and *Mek Mulung* is only a small part of their curriculum. On the other hand, it will need some sort of funding to bring them here to perform in Wang Tepus. It is a good idea to bring back more performances to the *bangsal* in Wang Tepus and have students do more field-research and workshop-learning base where they are immersed in the community of the performers. More performances in Wang Tepus will encourage audiences to come to experience the village performances. By bringing more audiences into the *kampung* and informing more people about *Mek Mulung*, carefully controlled tourism can increase exposure and possibly interest towards the village version. These *Mek Mulung* performances and activities can be included in the state's tourism board and JKKN Kedah's calendar of events. At the same time, urban *Mek Mulung* performers are now encouraged to visit Wang Tepus to collaborate with the village performers to improve their knowledge of the *Mek Mulung* tradition and perform with them in the *kampung*.

A seventh recommendation is to include *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus as part of various tourism and festival activities. Various traditional performances (Schippers, 2016; Dunbar-Hall, 2016; Wettermark & Lundström, 2016) have included and benefitted from tourism as part of their sustainability efforts. By bringing more audiences into the *kampung* and informing more people about *Mek Mulung*, carefully controlled tourism will increase interest towards the village form generally. Through the state tourism board and

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<sup>182</sup> The conversation took place during one of the visits I made to Pak Saad's house in September 2018. In the presence of her parents, Nurul asked, "*Kenapa Kak Zam tak bawak students ASWARA mai main kat bangsal?*".

also the Kedah state JKKN, a calendar of events can include *Mek Mulung* performances and activities, with a right balance between the urban and the Wang Tepus versions. Annual arts festivals, such as the Georgetown Festivals, Butterworth Fringe Festivals, Kuala Lumpur DiverCity, and Sime Darby Arts festivals can provide stable annual platforms for *Mek Mulung* to perform outside of Wang Tepus. *Mek Mulung* specific festivals like the My *Seni Budaya Mek Mulung @ Sintok* on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> October 2017 and the workshop conducted by Zamzuriah, Kamarul Baisah and I on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2018 can also provide audiences with interactive experiences of *Mek Mulung*. These activities can be tailored to new audiences that are interested to learn more about the performance.

In addition to festivals outside of Wang Tepus, festivals within the *kampung* can ideally be supported by the local government as an activity to support national heritage. Bringing people to the *kampung* can help improve the economy of the community through arts tourism. In previous research, I suggested establishing a homestay program for tourists/guests in the village, but including activities planned around *Mek Mulung* during their stay. Successful models for this include Kampung Permatang Duku in Johor state. Tourists who choose to stay in the *kampung* environment experience local cultures and participate in traditional rural lifestyle activities, enriching their understanding of Malaysia (Nur Izzati, 2014). A special program supported and regulated under the Ministry of Tourism will not only promote local tourism but has been proven in other places to improve rural development (Ahmad Fitri *et al*, 2015; Yahya & Abdul Rasid, 2010). Participating in this niche tourism industry can be a great opportunity for the community of Wang Tepus. However, the performers have to be mindful to avoid drastic modifications when profit motive is involved. It is possible that the performers may

provide a separate view for tourists; yet for themselves, perform a version that is truer to their own needs. Wettermark and Lundström (2016) used Ronstrom's concept of "mindscapes" to develop a framework for the three mindscapes in the case of the Vietnamese *ca trù*. Different forms of cultural products are made available for different markets; in the case of *ca trù*, Wettermark and Lundström labelled them as the "heritage mindscape", the "revolutionary mindscape", and the "*ca trù* mindscape" (2016, p. 316). Otherwise, there is the danger of going to the extreme of making changes to the performances to fulfil the needs and imagination of the tourists at the expense of sacrificing the village's needs, as happened to the dances of the Mah Meri of Pulau Carey in Selangor state (Chan, 2015).

The recommendations discussed within this concluding chapter aim to provide solutions to increase active participation in and the viability of *Mek Mulung* performance in various spaces, but most importantly for the Wang Tepus *Mek Mulung* itself. These recommendations are suggestions that can be implemented through the collaboration of various agencies, such as government agencies like JKKM, National Heritage Department, and the Tourism Board, non-profit organizations which support arts projects such as PUSAKA and foundations established by private corporations such as Sime Darby Foundation and Hasanah Foundation. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities by various agencies can also be organized in efforts towards providing support for *Mek Mulung* preservation. With her influence and recognition as a *Mek Mulung* expert and advocate, Zamzuriah and her husband have already embarked on getting various project proposals to the appropriate agencies. My role is less in the negotiation aspects, but more in terms of reaching out to international readers and researchers for discussions and inputs

for viable suggestions. This can provide new perspectives and encouragement to agencies for their commitment to make grants available for carrying out proposed projects.

The ultimate goal is to restore the high importance of the performance within the *kampung* that it once had, and for the village form to be promoted and positively received outside of Wang Tepus. Increasing vibrancy from the grass root level is highly challenging to ensure greater awareness of *Mek Mulung*'s importance in the village. The community's lack of interest coupled with poverty in their village are limitations to sustaining the tradition's continuity without the support from external help. The heritage status accorded to *Mek Mulung* by Kedah state may be an important element which the tradition bearers, the community, and the village can take pride in recognition of its village version of the performance. However, there may also be pitfalls to *Mek Mulung*'s heritage status. If *Mek Mulung* continues to exist and develop actively within the community to keep performances alive, then the heritage title may create difficulties for *Mek Mulung* in its village context. It may turn out to have a negative impact because the heritage title requires adherence to certain rules and regulations. In one recent case, the Temple Committee of *Batu Caves* (another Malaysian heritage-status site) opposed the National Heritage committee, which had plans to revoke its heritage status just because some repair work was done that did not fully conform to the National Heritage guidelines. The committee members themselves told the Heritage Committee that they did not mind the revocation because the decision was made for the benefit of tourists and devotees (Nair, 2018). Similarly, in the case of *Mek Mulung*, the community has to decide what is best for its own heritage, express their own thoughts and views about *Mek Mulung*, and preserve it to the best of their ability, even if it would mean going against the guidelines established by the Department of National Heritage.

My recommendations of how to manage *Mek Mulung* within Wang Tepus with an eye to its sustainability have wider applications, which I hope to pursue in future research. Given my position as an academician at one of the higher learning institutions which funded my studies and research, it is most likely that I may be in a favourable position to pursue further an in-depth study analysing various case studies and best practices in the management of the traditional arts in Malaysia, and perhaps in the Southeast Asian context. This area of applied ethnomusicology is urgently needed to help organizations and individuals revitalise and sustain important cultural heritage. So far there have been few studies of traditional- and folk-arts management strategies in the region (Peters & Cherbo, 1998; Peterson, 1996). Particularly valuable will be studies that focus on communities beyond urban centres with very little financial support, and with performances by professional and non-professional traditional performing artists in rural environments. The outcome of such research will help organizations and individuals that are interested in community development through the arts find sustainable ways to improve the resiliency of their arts more efficiently than the frequently inappropriate strategies taken from Western Art Management frameworks imposed from above (Evrard & Colbert, 2000; Preece, 2011; Rentschler, 2002).

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## Appendix A: Glossary of Malay Terms

Awang	Male comic character wearing half-faced red masks. King's servant and loyal companion.
Awang Batil	A storyteller who is accompanied by an overturned brass bowl that the performer beats while performing a monologue or singing.
Baju Kebaya	Malay two-piece female attire. The top is front opening and fitted. The skirt is usually an A-line design.
Baju Kurung	Malay two-piece female attire that is loose. The top is a long-sleeved tunic of knee length. The skirt has several folds at the side.
Bangsai	A semi-permanent open hut where the <i>Mek Mulung</i> performance is held.
Bangsawan	A modern proscenium theatre performance based on the Parsi Theatre.
Bekas Pinang	The container to store the betel nut
Bertabik	The second piece performed as part of the opening sequence of the <i>Mek Mulung</i> performance.
Bertabuh	The first piece performed as part of the opening sequence of the <i>Mek Mulung</i> performance to signal the start of the performance.
Bertih	Popped Rice.
Buka Panggung	A ritual performed by selected performers of the <i>Mek Mulung</i> troupe to ensure the safety of the performance.
Bumiputera	An umbrella term to group Malaysian natives that include the Malays, the multiple ethnics of Borneo and Indigenous Malaysians. Bumiputera citizens have special rights among other things higher quota for tertiary education and land purchases.
Cahaya Bulan	One of the stories that is used in the performance.

Cak Semelut	A phrase that has no meaning that is used by the Awang and the Inang to signal their entrance from the chorus section to the performance area in the centre of the Bangsal. This begins the interaction of the Awang and the Raja or the Inang with the Puteri.
Canang	(Instrument) A pair of gong chime placed on a rack that is hit with the wrapped mallet.
Dewa Kaca	One of the stories of the <i>Mek Mulung</i> .
Dewa Muda	One of the stories of the <i>Mek Mulung</i> .
Duit Pengeras	A token sum of money agreed upon parties as a form of down payment or offering to stage a performance. It is an addition to the performance payment
Gendang	(Instrument) General term for drum. Usually meant barrel shaped drum.
Gendang Anak	A small frame drum in the <i>Mek Mulung</i> ensemble. The Gendang Anak has a neutral skin color hide.
Gendang Ibu	A large frame drum in the <i>Mek Mulung</i> ensemble.
Gendang Silat	Musical ensemble that accompanies the <i>silat</i> , a Malay martial arts.
Gerak Timpuh	One of the songs accompanied by a dance in the opening section.
Hadrah	A form of theatre in Kedah and Perlis that was brought in from Nagore India accompanied by a small drum ensemble. Its original form consists of singing Islamic phrases or Zikir. It is performed by men.
Inang	A maid character in the performance. The Inang serves as a companion to the Puteri.
Jalan Slalu	A phrase meaning “to continuously walk” that is used by the performers to signal moving from one place to another.

Jikey	Malay dance drama mainly in Kedah and Perlis. The performance has similarities to the Likey Pa from Southern Thailand.
Kain Pelikat	A cotton skirt-like garment worn by men.
Kampung	Village.
Kecerek	A pair of bamboo concussion clappers.
Kecil Milik	The closing song.
Ketupat	Rice or glutinous rice cakes.
Khabar Bilang	A song to introduce the story.
Lupa	Trance (Literally means to forget).
Main Puteri	A healing ritual performance in Kelantan.
Mak Yong	A type of dance-drama that is more commonly found in the Malaysian state of Kelantan. Other versions of Mak Yong also previously appeared in Kedah and Perlis but are now extinct. A Riau version is still performed with similar attributes.
Malim Bongsu	One of the stories in <i>Mek Mulung</i> .
Mantera	Incantation.
Masuk ke Taman	A song that is danced in the garden.
Mengulit	A night song for a king.
Menora	A dance-drama that is influenced and sometimes in Thai language.
Menurun	Trance.
Mong	(Instrument) A single gong chime that is struck with a wrapped mallet. It may or may not be placed on a suspended rack.

Nobat	A court music ensemble that is used in the state of Kedah, Selangor, Perak, Selangor and Terengganu.
Panggung	Designated performance space/hall.
Pantun	Rhythmic quatrains.
Para	Altar.
Pecah Lakon	A section of the <i>Mek Mulung</i> where the story is introduced.
Peran Kiau	A name for one of the Awangs.
Peran Muda	A name for one of the Awangs.
Peran Tua	A name for one of the Awangs.
Puteri	Princess, wife of the Raja character.
Raja	Raja, King character.
Raja Gergasi	Ogre king character.
Randai	A Minangkabau folk theatre that originates from west Sumatera and is also performed by the Minangkabau diaspora within Malaysia.
Rebab	A three stringed bowed lute or spiked fiddle.
Rebana	A frame drum.
Ronggeng	A social dance genre.
Rotan Ketujuh	A prop (a whip) used by the Raja and the Puteri.
Sampin	A short skirt-like garment usually worn by men over their trousers.
Sarung	A long skirt.
Selampit	A form of storytelling from the state of Perlis that does not have any accompanying instrument
Sembah Guru	A ritual performance of a <i>Mek Mulung</i> .

Semborong	A small frame drum. The hide has a darker shade of red to differentiate it from the gendang anak.
Serunai	A free reed oboe.
Tarinai	A dance that originates from Kelantan that is influenced by the Malay martial art silat and involves a series of backbends.
Tengkolok	A headgear worn by men.
Tiang Seri	A spiritual pillar located within the Bangsal.
Tok Wak	An old sage character.
Tongkat Wak	A short staff prop used by the Old sage.
Tutup Panggung	A ritual done after the performance is completed to ensure the safety of the performance.
Ucap Tetap	Mandatory phrases used in the <i>Mek Mulung</i> performance.
Wajik	A sweet treat of glutinous rice and palm sugar.
Wayang Golek	3D puppets used by puppeteers that are mainly performed in West Java.
Wayang Kulit	A shadow puppet play accompanied by a small ensemble.
Wayang Kulit Fusion	A modern new creation of shadow puppets which is the brainchild of Tintoy Chuo
Wayang Kulit Gedek	A Kedah based shadow puppet genre that has influences of south Thailand.

## Appendix B: List of Acronyms

AKRAB	Persatuan Penggerak Warisan Budaya. A theatre group based in Kedah.
ASK	Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (National Academy of Arts). The former name of ASWARA
ASTRO	All-Asian Satellite Television and Radio Operator
ASWARA	Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage)
CENDANA	Cultural Economy Development Agency
DBKL	Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (Kuala Lumpur City Hall)
DFP	Dewan Filharmonik Petronas (Petronas Philharmonic Hall)
FINAS	Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia. (National Film Development Corporation Malaysia)
ITBM	Institut Terjemahan dan Buku Malaysia (Malaysian Institute of Translation and Books)
JAİK	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Kedah (Department for Islamic Development Kedah)
JAKIM	Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (Department for Islamic Development Malaysia)
JKKN	Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara (National Department for Culture and Arts). (Federal Level)
JKKNKedah	Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negeri Kedah (Kedah State Department for Culture and Arts) (State Level)
MaTiC	Malaysia Tourism Information Centre
PETRONAS	Petroleum Nasional Berhad (National Petroleum Limited)
PPAG	Petronas Performing Arts Group
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization

*REC Reference Number: LRS-15/16-2468*

**MEK MULUNG URBAN AUDIENCE QUESTIONNAIRE**

Please circle the relevant answers or fill in the blanks:

**Section A: Personal Details**

1. Are you Male or Female:

- a. Male
- b. Female

2. Your Age: \_\_\_\_\_ years

3. Your Race: a. Malay                      b. Chinese  
                    c. Indian                      d. Others (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

4. Highest Education attained:

- a. Primary School
- b. Lower Secondary
- c. Upper Secondary
- d. Pre-Univeristy
- e. Diploma
- f. Graduate
- g. Postgraduate
- h. Others (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

5. What is your occupation:

- a. Professional
- b. Semi-Professional
- c. Non-professional
- d. Student
- e. Unemployed
- f. Retiree

6. Are you currently a resident of Kedah?

- a. Yes
- b. No

7. If No, have you ever lived in Kedah?

- a. Yes
- b. No

8. If Yes, when and for how long?

From: \_\_\_\_\_ To: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ years

Section B: The Performance

9. Is this your first time watching a *Mek Mulung* performance?

- a. Yes
- b. No



10. If No, where have you watched the performance before? Please choose one closest answer

- a. In Kuala Lumpur by this same performing group
- b. In Kuala Lumpur by another performing group
- c. In Wang Tepus
- d. In another place other than Wang Tepus
- e. A recorded version (YouTube, Facebook etc)
- f. Others, (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

11. Have you heard about *Mek Mulung* before this?

- a. Yes
- b. No

12. If Yes, state where you have heard it from? Please choose one closes answer

- a. I have read about it in print (books, newspaper articles, academic materials)
- b. I have watched a documentary about *Mek Mulung*
- c. I have heard it in a class/lecture/seminar/talk
- d. I knew through someone's encounter with the performance
- e. I have watched a performance of *Mek Mulung* in Wang Tepus
- f. I have watched the performance elsewhere
- g. Others (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

13. How did you find out about the performance? Please choose one closes answer

- a. Newspaper
- b. Banner/flyer
- c. Friends/Family
- d. Internet
- e. Radio/TV
- f. Others (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

14. What motivated you to come for the performance? Please choose one closest answer

- a. I have seen it before and I like the performance.
- b. This is something new to me. I was curious.
- c. This performance was recommended by someone I know.
- d. I am here with someone or part of a group who enjoys the show.
- e. I received a free ticket.
- f. I am giving support to a performer.
- g. Others (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

15. How much would you be willing to pay for a performance like this?

- a. No more than RM10
- b. No more than RM 25
- c. No more than RM 30
- d. No more than RM 35
- e. No more than RM 40
- f. I would pay more than RM 40 to see a show like this.

g. I would only go if admissions is free

16. What do you expect from the performance?

- a. I have seen the performance before. I know that I will enjoy it.
- b. I hope that it is worth what I am paying for.
- c. I do not have any expectations.
- d. Others (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Section C: Post-performance

17. How did you like the performance?

- a. It was very entertaining.
- b. It was OK.
- c. I did not understand the performance.
- d. I did not enjoy it.
- e. Others (specify): \_\_\_\_\_

18. Would you come for another *Mek Mulung* performance if it were to be staged in the future?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Maybe

19. Did you know that *Mek Mulung* originates from the village of Wang Tepus in Kedah?

- a. Yes
- b. No

20. Any other comments or suggestions:

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS SURVEY**

## Appendix D: Synopsis of Stock Stories

### *Cahaya Bulan*

The story begins with the *Puteri Nang Mara* (Princess Nang Mara) recalling a dream. In the dream, she sees a white dove perched on her palms. As she tries to squeeze the bird, the bird flies away and a melancholy feeling lingers in her heart. She summons her *Inang* (maids) to accompany her to see the *Raja Cahaya Bulan* or King *Cahaya Bulan* at his throne room (*ladang balai*). Upon seeing the *Raja*, the *Puteri* tells the *Raja* about her dream who then reassures her that he will address this dream to the *Tok Wak* (the old sage).

The *Puteri* and her *Inang* then leave the *ladang balai* to return to her quarters (*Anjung Istana*). The *Raja* then summons his *Awang Pengasuh* or servants to ask them to convey the dream to *Tok Wak*. *Awang Pengasuh* are then told by the *Tok Wak* that the *Raja* must prepare for the arrival of *Raja Gergasi* (Ogre King) who is coming to take the *Puteri* as his prisoner. To prevent the *Raja Gergasi* from entering the city, the *Raja* must summon the people to play different types of performances for seven days and seven nights, so no one will sleep to protect the city from the *Raja Gergasi*.

The *Raja Gergasi* however succeeds in entering the city with the help of a magic horn that when blown causes everyone to fall asleep. *Raja Gergasi* then kills the *Raja* with an arrow and takes the *Puteri*. The *Puteri* makes a final request to have the body of the *Raja* placed in a coffin and to be sent to be thrown into the river. The coffin however travels upstream.

The body of the *Raja* is found by two wondering friends named *Epong* and *Edeng*. They both possess magical powers that could heal the *Raja*. Upon awakening the *Raja* thanked the two friends and the three of them travel to the land of the *Raja Gergasi* called *Benua Pak Kian* to save the *Puteri*. The *Raja* then fights *Raja Gergasi* and defeats him. He then takes the *Puteri* and rewards *Epong* and *Edeng* for their bravery.

### **Malim Bongsu**

*Malim Bongsu* is a story of the Prince Malim Bongsu who goes fishing in a nearby stream with his two *Awangs*. Upon reaching the stream they hear a voice telling them that there are no fishes there but are abundant upstream where the fish are being tended by Siti Jagelan. Malim Bongsu and his *Awangs* decide to travel upstream to fish there.

News reached Siti Jagelan about Malim Bongsu's plan and she and her *Inangs* chase Malim Bongsu and his *Awang* from the stream. Bitterly, Malim Bongsu heads to a forest where he asks the servants to find a rooster which he would use to charm Siti Jagelan to fall in love with him. He then places the rooster near Siti Jagelan's garden. As soon as Siti Jagelan hears the rooster's cry, she becomes light-headed.

Siti Jagelan asks her maids to find out who had charmed her and asks for a betel nut. Her *Inang* goes into the forest and finds Malim Bongsu who gives her three betel nuts. Siti Jagelan recovers after eating the third betel nut. They become madly in love and before he returns to his palace, Malim Bongsu promises to come back so they could marry. If Siti Jagelan breaks her promise, she will turn into a crippled and mad monkey on a volcano. If Malim Bongsu breaks his promise, he will turn into a serpent that swims under the volcano under the sea.

As time passed, a young merchant by the name of Malim Panjang sees Siti Jagelan and falls in love with her. Siti Jagelan becomes sad when her father accepts Malim Pnajang's request to marry Siti Jagelan. As she cries, her body is transformed into a monkey and is flown to a volcano. While travelling in the forest, Malim Bongsu spots a monkey that resembles Siti Jagelan. He makes a trap and captures Siti Jagelan. They return to her village where she changes back into her human form. Her father then marries off Siti Jagelan with Malim Bongsu.

### *Dewa Kaca*

The *Dewa Kaca* narrated by the late Pak Leh<sup>183</sup> starts with the *Puteri* wondering why her husband has not come over to see her. The *Puteri* then summons her *Inang* to visit the *Raja* at his residence (*ladang balai*) to find out what he is up to. The *Inang* approaches the *Raja*'s residence and is greeted by *Awang*. *Awang* then tells *Inang* that the reason the *Raja* has not returned is because he is being attended by several women. *Inang* returns to the *Puteri* and tells her about the *Raja*. The *Puteri* becomes furious and locks herself inside.

When the *Raja* returns to see the *Puteri* the next day, no one is able to get in because all the doors are locked. The *Raja* eventually manages to enter the building and confronts the *Puteri*. The *Puteri* speaks angrily with the *Raja* who then decides to divorce her and returns to his residence with his belongings.

*Awang* realizes his wrongdoings and tells the *Raja* about his lie to the *Inang*. They both travel back to meet the *Puteri* who eventually forgives them. The *Puteri* the *Raja* are back together. The *Awang* is punished by marrying the *Inang*.

The version narrated by Zaleha in 1975 retains only a small part of the beginning of the story. This version could have been narrated by Pak Taib or Pak Leh who were her informants then. It starts with the *Puteri* in despair as her husband, the *Raja Dewa Kaca*, has not come to see her for some time. She asks her *Inang* to meet the *Raja* and find out why he has come back to see her.

*Inang* travels to *Dewa Kaca*'s residence and is greeted by the *Raja* upon her arrival. The *Raja* asks if all provisions back home are in order and then summons the *Inang* back to the *Puteri*. Upon her return, *Inang* decides to lie to the *Puteri* saying that

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<sup>183</sup> Personal communication with Zamzuriah.



there are other women at *Dewa Kaca*'s residence. Furious at this news, and without investigating further, she orders *Inang* to lock the doors and windows to prevent anyone in, especially the *Raja*.

The next day when *Dewa Kaca* returns to see the *Puteri*, he is surprised that all the doors and windows are locked. The *Raja* eventually manages to enter and confronts the *Puteri* who gets into a rage. With a heavy heart, *Dewa Kaca* leaves the raging *Puteri*. Meanwhile, *Awang* gets into a fight with his wife and divorces her.

*Dewa Kaca* asks *Awang* to prepare his boat and they both decide to set off on a journey. In the middle of the ocean, the boat spins and moves back to the shore. They eventually find out that the *Puteri* has put a charm on the boat to prevent the *Raja* from leaving. The *Raja* is determined to go on the journey and is warned by the *Puteri* not return to her again.

*Dewa Kaca* and *Awang* resume their travel and reach a kingdom in which there is a Princess whom *Dewa Kaca* wishes to marry. *Dewa Kaca* meets with the King and is told that he can marry the Princess if he can get him a golden magic kite which can take him to travel to the celestial realm to find his aunt.

*Dewa Kaca* successfully gets the magic kite and presents it to the King. Unfortunately, the King loses his grip when he flies off with the magic kite. The King dies when he falls down to the ground. The wedding takes place as promised but soon after *Dewa Kaca* feels uneasy and decides to leave his new bride to return to his homeland. *Dewa Kaca* does not return to his first wife as promised. Instead, *Dewa Kaca* and *Awang* sadly continue their travels to many places aimlessly.

### **Puteri Dua Belas Beradik**

According to Zaleha (1975), the story involves a married couple who is childless. The couple eventually seeks the help of a shaman and from then onwards the couple has a daughter each year for twelve years. As the years passed, they realize that they are not able to care for the children and decide to leave them in the forest. While wondering in the forest, a boat maker takes pity on the girls and raises them as his own.

A King finds out about the twelve sisters and decides to marry all twelve of them. Not long after that, all the princesses become pregnant. An Ogress, jealous of the prosperous princesses, decides to have the King for herself. She courts the King and tells him to leave the princesses in a deep hole. She digs all the eyes out of the princesses except the youngest who is left with one eye. Since the sisters are not able to find food, they eat all their children after they are born except for the child of the youngest princess.

The child grows up and manages to find his way out of the hole. One day he meets the King and enters a game of cock fighting with the King. His agreement with the King is that if he wins the King must give a packet of rice as a reward. One day the boy wins and he takes the rice packets back to the hole to feed the princesses. The King, however, has placed the rice in a sack that has a hole in it so that it leaves a trail when he returns to the hole. The King follows the trail and upon finding out about the princesses, realizes that the boy is his son.

The Ogress finds out and decides to kill the young prince. She fakes an illness and tells the king that the boy must find a cure for her in the land of the ogres. The boy is to travel on a flying horse. The Ogress writes and attaches a letter on the neck of the horse. The message in letter says “Eat him in the morning if arrives in the morning, eat him in the evening if arrives in the evening”. The boy then leaves and along the way stops to rest.

While the prince sleeps, a monk passes by and notices the letter. He takes pity on the prince and changes the message in the letter which now reads “Receive him in the morning if arrives in the morning, receive him in the evening if arrives in the evening, for his is the son-in-law of the Ogress”. The prince wakes up from his nap and continues his journey. Upon arriving at the land of the ogres, the ogres are about to devour the prince when they notice the letter. They celebrate the arrival of the prince and even marries him off to the daughter of the Ogre King.

Months go by before the prince finds out about the container in the palace in which the eyes of the twelve princesses are kept. The prince then makes plans to escape from the palace to return the eyes to the princesses. While trying to escape, the daughter of the Ogre King decides to follow the prince on a flying boar. The prince brings along with him a potion that when is smashed kills all the ogres. The prince kills the ogres and returns to be reunited with the princesses.

## Appendix E: *Mek Mulung* Songs

### Bertabik

<u>Bertabik</u>	(English translation)
<p>Kecil milik mengaranglah eee yang bunga  Amboi bunga dikaranglah eee tidaklah eee bertali  Amboi bunga keduduklah eee di dalam ayaq  Amboi bunga mulunglah eee seberang paya  Amboi bunga dah lawanglah di tanahlah eee yang lembah.  La amboi tabik dah ngecik dah tuanlah semua  La amboi kami yang duduklah di dalam la ee belajar  La amboi timbul nok sebutlah segala la ee yang ngejin  La amboi ngejin yang tanahlah jembalang la ee yang bumi  La amboi ngudur lah dirilah bertigo la eee yang langkah  La amboi jangan dah ngan mu meninggai la eee yang jauh  La kami nok mintak lah di tempatlah eee bermain  La kawai di depanlah di kawai la eee belakang  La kawai kirilah di kawai la eee di kanan</p> <p>La empat penahatlah penjuru lah eee yang bangsai  Kawai semualah di panjak la eee bermain</p> <p>Jangan dok bagilah dok kacau la eee yang cela  Jangan dok bagilah dok pening la eee yang kelam  Ngajin doh hitamlah memangku la eee yang bumi</p>	<p>Kecil milik (a character: small possession) composes eee of a flower  Oh the flower is composed eee has no strings  Oh the flower is positioned eee floating on the water  Oh the flower Mulung eee is on the other side of the wetland  Oh the star anise on the ground eee of the valley  La oh I have salute humbly to all of you</p> <p>La oh all of us sitting inside here la eee are still learning  La oh it's the time to mention everything la eee of the spirits  La oh the spirits of the earth and the ghosts la eee on this earth  La oh retreat yourselves in threes la eee of the leap  La oh don't you leave again la eee of going afar  La oh we would like to ask for this place, we perform eee the play  La guard in front and guard la eee at the back  La guard at the left and guard la eee at the right  La four places at the corners la eee of the hut  Guard all performers la eee that are performing  Do not allow to be disturbed la eee lest it will become imperfect  Do not allow us to become light headed la eee in the darkness  Dark spirits that lives la eee on this earth</p>

Ngajin doh putihlah meyulam la eee yang langit	The white spirits weave la eee across the sky
Nganjin doh kuninglah bertandang la eee yang desa	The yellow spirits arriving la eee from the countryside
La amboi Ngajin dah tunggal lah di pintu la eee yang langit	La oh the single spirit at the door la eee of the sky
La amboi hilang doh kisahlah segala la eee yang ngajin	La oh lost all the stories of the spirits la eee of the spirits
La amboi timbul nok sebutlah segala la eee keramat	La oh it is time to mention all la eee is sacred
La amboi Keramat di lautlah keramat la eee di darat	La oh the sacred of the sea and the sacred la eee of the land
La amboi Keramat di laut lah tok pawang la eee yang sail/sain	La oh the sacred in the sea la the medicine man la eee that arrives
Keramat di darat lah tok pawang la eee...yang rimbo	The sacred at on land of the medicine man la eee of the forest
La amboi keramat di sini lah cik tabiklah eee disini	La oh the sacred place is here so salute la eee over here
Tabik seoranglah cik tabik lah eee semua	Salute alone I salute to you la eee to everyone
Hilang dah kisahlah segala la eee keramat	All of the stories are lost la eee that are sacred
Timbul nok sebutlah di raja yang guru	This is the time to mention the king that is the guru
Amboi guru doh tua lah di guru la eee yang muda	Oh the old guru and the guru la eee and the young
Peran dah tua la di peran la eee yang muda	The elder servant and the servant la eee the young
Guru dah tua la di orang la eee pertama	The old guru is the person la eee the first one
Guru dah muda lah di orang la eee permainan	The young guru is the person la eee in the performance
Peran dah tua la di ngorang la eee ke sakti	The older servant is the person la eee with the magic
Peran dah muda la di muda la eee yang lakling	The younger servant is younger la eee with the lakling magic
Hilang dah kisahlah diraja la eee yang guru	Gone are the stories of the king's la ee of the guru's
La..amboi timbul nok sebutlah di jeman la eee yang dulu	La oh it is time to mention the stories once upon a time la eee of the past
La amboi ada dan dululah di ada la eee sekarang	La oh there is and before had la eee right now
La amboi boleh doh ngeciklah dok bawak laeee bermain	La oh is available to humbly carry la eee to perform
Eeee...lagi mati raja doh raja bersalin raja	Eee...when there is a death of a king a new king rises

<p>Raja wei ooo.. raja bernama doh besar tok raja besar</p> <p>Besar wei ooo...bonda bernama lah sakti bongsu kesakti</p> <p>Sakti wei ooo.. lagi anak bernamalah bulan Cahaya Bulan</p> <p>Bulan wei ooo...lagi adik bernama lah mara puteri Nang Mara</p> <p>Mara weh oo... lagi duduk beradu dah setana anjung setano</p> <p>Stano wei ooo... lagi ayah tidak lah tidak bonda pun tidak</p> <p>Tidak wei oo...lagi tidak sekali dah ngasuh inang pengasuh</p>	<p>The king hey ooo...the king is named besar, (grand) Tok Raja besar (the grand ole king)</p> <p>Grand hey ooo...the enchanted queen is named, bongsu kesakti (enchanted youngest)</p> <p>Enchanted hey ooo...The child is then named from the moon, Cahaya Bulan (the light of the moon)</p> <p>The moon hey ooo...the wife/princess is then named Mara, Princess Nang Mara</p> <p>Mara hey ooo the princess resides there at the palaces' balcony</p> <p>Palace hey ooo...has no father nor have the mother</p> <p>Has nor hey ooo...is not together with the servant maid</p>
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## Gerak Timpuh

<u>Gerak Timpuh</u>	(English Translation)
<p>Eeee setelah sudah amboi di saya la eee bertabik</p> <p>Amboi timbui nak sebutlah di jeman la eee...dan dulu</p> <p>Amboi ada dan dulu lah di ada la eee...sekarang</p> <p>Amboi boleh dah ngeciklah dok bawak la eee..bermain</p> <p>Ee tokleh ralek amboi didagang la ee dok bilang</p> <p>La ngamboi lagi dok bilang bertambah lah eee yang banyak</p> <p>Lah ngamboi baik doh ngecek bersiap la eee bersimpan</p> <p>La amboi siap bersimpan pakaian la eee yang badan</p> <p>Doh amboi ambik doh sisiak cek sisiak la eee bersurai</p> <p>La ngamboi sisiak bersurai cek sanggoi la eee yang lipat</p> <p>Ya amboi tujuh doh lipat sembilan la eee yang ulai</p> <p>La amboi anak lah rambut di naga la eee berbelai</p> <p>Ya amboi anak nok rambut di sunting la eee terbelai</p> <p>Ya amboi ekor doh pipit di gerak la eee berjuntai</p> <p>La amboi ambik doh bedok cik lulur la eee ke muka</p> <p>La amboi lulur sekali semua la eee yang rata</p> <p>La amboi ambik doh celok cik pateh la eee di kening</p> <p>La amboi kening dah lentik di bentuk la eee yang tadi</p> <p>La amboi ambik doh kain cek sarung lah eee di kaki</p> <p>La amboi cerai di kaki cermin la eee di pinggang</p>	<p>Eee...after I completed oh la eee...my salutation</p> <p>Oh so I begin to tell what happened once upon a time la eee...and before</p> <p>Oh there was before as there is now la eee...right now</p> <p>Oh I humbly present the performance la eee...a play</p> <p>Eeee I shall wait no longer oh to sing to you la eee...time is fleeting</p> <p>La oh time has passed; time and time again it has been lost la eee...more</p> <p>La oh I shall start prepare myself with my garments la eee...that have been kept</p> <p>La oh I shall get myself well-dressed with my garments la eee...on myself</p> <p>Have oh, I take my comb, I comb my hair la eee...untangled</p> <p>La oh, my hair that I have combed untangled, I fold into a bun la eee...that I fold</p> <p>Ya oh the seventh and the ninth have I folded la eee that have been folded</p> <p>La oh the hair has been kept majestically as a mighty dragon la eee...as I stroke</p> <p>Ya oh the tail of the sparrow part of my hair is, I moved la eee...as it drapes</p> <p>La oh I take my powder and brushed it over my face la eee...at my face</p> <p>La oh the powder I brushed, I wiped again la eee...thoroughly</p> <p>La oh I take an eyebrow liner and I colored la eee...on my eyebrow</p> <p>La oh the eyebrows are designed and shaped la eee...as before</p> <p>La oh I take my skirt and I slipped it through la eee...my legs</p> <p>La oh the separations of skirt I checked through the mirror la eee at my waist</p>

<p>La amboi ambik doh baju cik sarong la eee ke badan La amboi cukup doh genap pakaian la eee yang badan La amboi sini doh tempatlah di dagang la eee berjalan</p> <p><b><i>(Bangun berjalan)</i></b></p> <p>Eee. ..Gerak dah timpuh merungkai la eee yang silo La amboi bagai dah sawo bergerak la eee yang lingkar La amboi bagai dah punai meluit la eee yang kawan La amboi bagai dah sirih melayah la eee yang junjung La amboi bagai dah tarok mencari la eee yang junjung La amboi sini tempat di dagang la eee berjalan La amboi tok leh dok ralek kepada la eee yang sini La amboi baik menuju ke bilik la eee yang ayaq La amboi bangun berdiri di tapok la eee yang tigo La amboi dagang nak pecah la eee yang limo La amboi taut dah jangkah menukar la eee yang kacang La amboi tarik dah limbai mengamboi la eee yang bayam</p> <p>La amboi sini dah tempat di dagang la ee berjalan La amboi selang berjalan membelang la eee melenggang Jalan selalu la eee</p>	<p>La oh I take my clothes and I slipped it through la eee...on my body La oh my garments are completed la eee...the figure La oh here is the place I start to sing la eee...as I travel</p> <p>(Rise to walk)</p> <p>Eee...I move from my revering position to unravel la eee that we please La oh like the python moves la eee in a circular motion La oh like the pigeon opening its beak la eee of the flock La oh like the betel nut heavenly taste la eee...that balanced on the head La oh like how I misplaced and searched la eee...that balanced on the head La oh this is the place where I begin to sing la eee...I walk La oh I shall wait no further towards la eee over here La oh it would be better for me to head towards the place la eee the bathroom La oh I raise standing at this place la eee of the three La oh I sing to reveal la eee of the fifth La oh the creeping have changed its steps la eee of like the creeping of the peanut tree La oh the movements of the pulling and waving is delicate la eee like the spinach leaves in the wind La oh this is the time and place we sing la eee as we travel La oh we weave our steps together la eee casually We continue our travels la eeee</p>
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## Berjalan ke Bilik Ayaq

<u>Berjalan ke Bilik Ayaq</u>	(English Translation)
<p>Eee mana jatuh berjalan kita berjalan  Jalan wei ooo lagi jatuh kami dah ayaq di bilik ayaq  Ayaq wei ooo lagi jauh lagi dah masuk berlari masuk  Masuk wei ooo lagi sampai dekat dah duduk merendah duduk  Duduk wei ooo lagi renndah duduk dah kami menyampai keni  Keni wei ooo menyampai keni dah muka kubasuh muka  Muka wei ooo lagi basuh muka dah kumur lansung berkumur</p> <p>Berkumur wei ooo kumur sekali la dua menyampai dua  Dua wei ooo lagi dua tiga la sudah menolak sudah  Sudah wei ooo lagi pinang belum lah lagi ku makan lagi  Lagi wei ooo bangun berdiri dah syahadah mengucap syahadah  Syahadah weii ooo mengucap syahadah dah tua menguji tua  Tua wei ooo lagi belang lah tuju dah bilik ke pintu bilik  Bilik wei ooo lagi jauh lagi lah masuk berlari masuk  Masuk wei ooo lagi sampai dekat nak duduk merendah duduk  Duduk wei ooo merendah duduk lah jorong menarik jorong  Jorong weii ooo menarik jorong dah pinang kumakan pinang  Pinang wei ooo makan sepiak dah dua menyampai dua  Dua wei ooo lagi dua tiga lah sudah menolak sudah  Yooo...</p>	<p>Eee...where we are at we travel  Walking hey ooo...we have arrived at near the bath at the bathing chamber  Bath hey ooo... it is still far to go but we entered and hurried in  Enter hey ooo...as we draw near we sit, humbly we sit  Sitting hey ooo... as we humbly sit, the bucket, we take the bucket  Bucket hey ooo...as we draw the water, our face we wash our face  Face hey ooo...we washed our face again then gargled, we continued to gargled water  Gargled hey ooo...we gargled once then twice we did it twice  Twice hey ooo...twice now thrice we have finished  Finished hey ooo...the betel nut I have not eaten yet  Again hey ooo...I rise up and stand for prayer, to recite a prayer  Prayer hey ooo...I recite a prayer then I salute my elders  My elders hey ooo...had moved to the direction of the room the room door  The room hey ooo...it is still far but I hurried to enter into the room  Entering hey ooo...as I draw near I sit, humbly I sit  Sitting hey ooo...as I humbly sit I pull my betel nut box, I take the betel nut case  The betel nut case hey ooo as I take my box, the betel nut, I eat the betel nut  The betel nut hey ooo... I eat one bite and another, I eat the second  The second hey ooo... the second and the third I finish and completed  Yooo...</p>

### Makan Pinang

<u>Makan Pinang</u>	(English Translation)
Telah sudah amboi memakan la eeee...yang pinang Laa amboi menengunglah seorang la eee...sendiri Amboi sorang sendiri lah di sorang la eee...senyawa La amboi ayah dah tidaklah mak bonda la eee...pun tidak La amboi tidak la sekalilah di inang la eee...pengasuh La amboi baik dah ngecik lah ke bilik la eee...lah inang La amboi hari dah baik lah ketika la eee...yang molek La amboi manis nak dagang lah nak tiba la eee...berjalan La jalan selalu la eee....	After I have completed oh eating la eeee...that betel nut La oh my thoughts are fleeting far on my own la eee...alone Oh on my own alone, I all alone la eeee...my life La oh father, nor mother, I have none la eee...also nor I have La oh not together with my maidens la eee...my servant maid La oh it's better for me to be with my feelings in this room...the maid La oh the day is well; the day is fine at this moment la eee...the pretty La oh the sweet serenade is about to arrive la eee...travelling I continue my travels la eeee.....

### Berjalan for Inang

<u>Berjalan</u>	(English Translation)
Eeee...mana jatuh berjalan saya berjalan  Jalan wei ooo, jatuh inang dah setano anjung setano  Setano wei...lagi sini tempat lah beradu selang beradu Beradu wei... selang beradu lah cara dengan bicara Yaaa..	Eeee... from the place that I stand I begin walking, I walk Walking hey ooo, I (the maid) have arrived at the palace, at the balcony of the palace The palace hey...this is the place of slumber, the princess's slumber Slumber hey...the place of slumber is where I engage with the princess Yaaa

Berjalan for Awang (Version 1)

<u>Berjalan</u>	(English Translation)
Eeee...mana jatuh berjalan saya berjalan Jalan wei ooo, di jatuh Awang dah balai di ladang balai Balai wei...lagi sini tempat lah radu selang beradu Radu wei selang beradu lah cara dengan bicara Yaaa..	Eeee...from the place that I stand I begin walking, I walk Walking hey ooo I (the servant) have arrived at the palace, the main palace Main palace hey...this is the place of slumber, where the king's slumber Slumber hey, the place of slumber where I engage with the king Yaaa

Berjalan For Awang (Version 2)

<u>Berjalan</u>	(English translation)
Eee.. tak leh ralek o sini kepada sini Sini eee... tuju balik oo balik oo balai ke ladang balai Balai eee.. selang berjalan ooo lenggang belang melenggang Lenggang eee.. pada berdahan oo duri baik berduri Duri eee kalau duri lah tupai digigit tupai Tupai eee... dari berjalan ooo lari baik berlari Jalan selalu la eee..	Eee...I can't wait no more ooo here from here Over here eee.... heading back towards ooo back to the palace, the main palace Main palace eee...step by step I stride ooo casually, very casually Casually eee...at a branch of a tree a thorn, there is a thorn Thorn eeee...if it is a thorn oh the squirrel will bite, will be bitten by the squirrel Squirrel eee...instead of walking I should better be running I will continue my travel eeee...

### Burong Odang

<u>Burong Odang</u>	(English translation)
Nyawa burung, burung Odang didondang, Bangunlah awang nyawa dok bangun ke nyawa eee Gerak bangun burung odang didondang	The life of bird, the kingfisher is cradled Wake up my servant, wake up to the life of you eee Wake up and move the kingfisher is cradled
Geraklah bangun, jaga bergoncang ooo jaga eee Sangat lama burung odang di dondang Sangatlah lama saya panggil dok panggil eee Susah siang burung odang di dondang	Move to wake up, awake and moving oo awake eee So long the kingfisher is cradled So long I have summoned you, summoned you eee The tough morning the kingfisher is cradled
Susahlah siang malam menjadi ooo malam eee Itu saja burung odang di dondang itulah saja, saya khabar bilang eee	The tough morning has passed ooo and it is night eee That's all the kingfisher is cradled That's all I would like to say

### Responding Burong Odang

<u>Burong Odang (Responding)</u>	(English Translation)
Apa khabar burung odang di dondang Apalah khabar awang dengan berito eee Sebab saya burung odang di dondang Sebablah saya suruh dok pinjam pesuruh eee Pinjam suruh burung odang di dondang Pinjamlah suruh la dek badan ooo inang eee Yaaa...	How do you do kingfisher in cradle swing How do you do my servant with the news eee Because of me kingfisher in cradle swing Because of I ask to order you as my servant eee My orders for you kingfisher in cradle swing To order the ooo the help of the maid eee Yaaa...

Gaduh Mana

<u>Gaduh mana</u>	(English Translation)
Gaduh mana la tuan susah mana	What are my tasks my lord and however demanding
Mana wei ooi..Jadi diam tak diam ooi awang mendapat awang	Where wei ooi... and I your servant has gathered the other servants
Awang eee..lagi bagai manik dah karang putus di karang	Your servant eee....like beads are been stranded from broken beaded charm
Karang eee.. lagi bagai kaca dah batu rembah di batu	Stranded eee....like falling glass that shattered from a stone
Batu eee.. lagi bagai budak dah tiga menumbuk tiga	Stone eee....like the yong ones, punching wildly in threes
Tiga eee..lagi parang sabit ooo mana di kola mana	Threes eeee...like the sickle in hand to go through the estuary
Mana wei ooo tawan dok musuh....di teluk mana	At which bay ooo...we defeat the enemy
Mana wei bapak nak pukui lah mana negeri mana	Where wei ...I am raring to go to the other place
Mana wei ooi lagi apa cik wang suruh bilang berkhobar bilang	Where wei...your wishes are my command my lord
Yaa..	Yaaa....

### Panggil Inang

<u>Panggil Inang</u>	(English translation)
Eeee..lagi bangun lekas la inang bilang segera Segera eee...lagi sangat lama dok panggil saya dok panggil  Panggil eeee....itu saja la kabar saya berkabar Yaa...	Eeee.... Hurry up and wake up dear maid and respond this instant Right now eee...I have summoned you, I your lord have been summoning you for too long Calling eeee...that's all I have to say Yaaa

### Inang Terkejut Jaga

<u>Inang Terkejut Jaga</u>	(English translation)
Terkejut jaga oi radu inang beradu  Radu wei oooi, lagi diam tak diam dah panggil orang dok panggil Panggil wei oooi,itu saja dah khabar inang berkhabar Yaaa...	Startled, I wake up oi I the maid, from my slumber My slumber hey oii the quietness has been broken as someone has been calling Calling hey oii that's all I the maid I have to say Yaaa....

## Timang Welu

<u>Timang Welu</u>	(English translation)
Dok berjalan, timang welu sayang tuan lah jalan	As I walk, timang welu (no particular meaning) my lord I walk
Dagang sayang berjalan, timang wela dodoi lah	As I travel, walking dearly, timang wela (no particular meaning) here I sing
Kaki berjangkah, timang welu sayang tuan lah limbai	The foot strides, timang welu my lord I wave my hand
Lah di anjung setano timang wela dodoilah	At the palace balcony timang wela I sing
Jauh lagi, timang welu sayang tuan lah masuk	From afar, timang welu come on in, my lord
Lah berlarilah masuk, timang wela dodoilah	Come on in quickly timang wela I sing
Sampai dekat, timang welu sayang tuanlah duduk	As I draw near, timang welu my lord sits
Lah merendah duduk timang wela dodoilah	I politely sit timang wela I sing
Mengangkatlah tangan, timang welu sayang tuanlah sembah	I raise my hands, timang welu my lord I bow (sembah)
La menjunjunglah sembah, timang wela dodoilah	I bow to respect timang wela I sing
Sembah sekali, timang welu sayang tuanlah dua	I bow once, timang welu my lord I bow the second time
La menyampailah dua, timang wela dodoilah	I bow again the second time, timang wela I sing
Dua tiga, timang welu sayang tuan la sudah	Two and three, timang welu my lord I have finished
La menolak lah sudah, timang wela dodoilah	I have arrived through the door, timang wela I sing
Ampun tuan, timang welu sayang tuanlah balik	Forgive me my lord timang welu I have returned
Inang sudahlah balik, timang wela dodoilah	Your maid has returned timang wela I sing
Yaaa..	Yaaa...

Khabar Bilang (Version 1)

<u>Khabar Bilang Version 1</u>	(English translation)
Dengar awang di la di awang ooi Dengarlah awang, awang ooi saya khabar bilang eeee Sebab panggil di la di awang ooi,  Sebablah panggil, awang ooi pengasuh yang tua eeee Pengasuh letak di la di awang ooi, Pengasuhlah letak, awang ooi di ayah mak bonda eeee Sebab pinjam di la di awang ooi,  Sebablah pinjam, awang ooi di saya nak suruh eeee Saya suruh di la di awang ooi, Sayalah suruh, awang ooi di badan awang eee Tangkap lakon di la di awang ooi, Lakon bernama, awang ooi, di Dewa Kaca eee Itu saja di la di awang ooi, Itulah saja, awang ooi, lah di saya khabar eee Ya!	Listen awang di la di oi awang Listen awang, Awang oi as I reveal my intentions eee The reason I summoned you di la di, awang ooi The reason I summoned you, awang ooi, my eldest servant eee The servants given di la di awang ooi, The servants given, awang ooi from my father and mother eeee The reason for summoning you di la di, awang ooi The reason for summoning, awang ooi, because I have work for you eeee Im asking you di la di awang ooi, Im asking you, awang ooi for your service awang eeee Revealing the act di la di awang ooi The act is called, awang ooi of Dewa Kaca (the god of glass) That's all di la di awang ooi That's all, awang ooi I have would like to say to you eee. Ya!



Tangkap Lakon (Version 2)

<u>Tangkap Lakon version 2</u>	(English translation)
Sebab panggil la oii sebab lah awang Sebab lah panggil awang pengasuh yang tua eee Pengasuh letak la oo sebab lah awang Pengasuh lah letak la di ayah mak bonda eee Turunkan saya la ooo sabaq lah awang Turunkan saya la pengasuh saya eee Sebab pinjam la ooo sebab lah awang  Sebablah pinjam lah di saya nak suruh eee  Saya nak suruh la ooo sebablah awang  Saya nak suruh la di badan awang eee Tangkap lakon la ooo sebab la awang  Tangkaplah lakon ... kita Lakon bernama la ooo sebab la awang  Lakon bernama lah di Dewa Kaca eee  Yaa!!!	I called you oii because my dear servant The reason I called you dear elder servant eee Helpers lay ooo the reason dear servant Helpers have laid for father and mother eee Bring me ooo patiently, dear servant Bring me down my dear helper eee The reason of my summoning la ooo the cause dear servant The reason for my summoning is because I would like to ask you something eee I would like to ask ooo the reason my servant I would like to ask to my servant eee Revealing the act ooo is the reason dear servant Revealing the act ... for us The act is called ooo the reason dear servant The act is called Dewa Kaca (the god of glass) Yaa!!

### Mengulit/Mengulik

<u>Lagu Mengulik</u>	(English translation)
Si lo eee la yang abang nak oii ke riba oi ngadik,	Please eeee dear my darling (husband/brother) on oii to my lap, your sweetheart (little sister)
Adik eee lah nak olek nak oii di raja beradu,	I (your sweetheart little sister) eeee would like to lull the oii the king so that he would rest his eyes
Tiup eee lah serunai nak oii di palu oi nobat,	Play eee the shawm and oii beat the drums of the Nobat
Anak eee yang nak ulik nak oii di pantun menyanyi,	Dearest child eee that asked to be lulled wants to be sung the rhythmic quatrains
Kalau eee lah nak elak nak oii di guguq oi nangka,	If eee the need to avoid oii the fall of the jackfruit
Kalau eee lah nak tidoq nak oii di tidoq oii mata	If eee the need to sleep oii do rest/close your eyes
Sarang eee lah penyengat nak oi di ranting oi pauh	The nest eeee of the wasp at oii the mango tree
Jangan eee lah dok ingat nak oii di orang yang jauh	Do not eee remember those oii that are far away

### Masuk ke Taman

<u>Masuk ke Taman</u>	(English translation)
Masuk ketaman melenggang sari amboi masuk ketaman,	Entering the garden happily, casually oh entering the garden
Lah melenggang sari lawa eee mak inang oii	Oh swaying through the flower petals, they are beautiful eeee dear maid oii
Bunga yang putih habislah di masak amboi bunga yang putih,	The white flower is ripening oh the white flower
Habislah di masak lawa eeee mak inang oii	All are ripe and are beautiful eeee dear maid oii
Bunga yang masak habislah dikembang amboi bunga yang masak	The ripening flowers are in full bloom oh the ripening flower,
Habislah di kembang lawa eeee mak inang oii	All are in full bloom and are beautiful eeee dear maid oii
Bunga yang kembang habislah dilayu amboi bunga yang kembang	The full bloomed flowers are all wilted oh the full bloomed flowers
Habislah dilayu lawa eeee mak inang oii	All are wilted but are still beautiful eeee dear maid oii

Kecil Milik

<u>Kecil Milik</u>	(English translation)
<p>Ayo Cik Milik mengaranglah bunga, Bunga di karang nandung sayang tidak bertali Tabiklah encik tuan semua Saya nak mintak nandung sayang mohon berhenti Putihlah bulan tidak melindungi Lilit terlilit nandung sayang di kaki dulang Letihlah lah badan tidak menanggung Tak sabit kulit nandung sayang berceraai tulang Janganlah tajo jagung petani Jagung petani nandung sayang baru berpagar Jangan dok ajuk Mek Mulung lah kami  Mek Mulung Kami nandung sayang baru belajar</p> <p>.....</p> <p>*Free pantun section</p> <p>Darilah nandung ke pantai Naning Orang bergajah nandung sayang dua beranak  Darilah jauh kami kemari Hendak menumpang nandung sayang orang yang banyak</p> <p>.....</p> <p>Takboleh ralit dah loka pantun seloka Kami beradu dah guru di bayan guru,</p>	<p>Dear Cik Milik (a character that means small possession) composes a flower, The flower composed in a love song has no strings I salute to you everyone I would like to ask in a love song a request to end the performance The white full moon has no shadow, Going around in tangles in a love song in a base of a large tray The body is tired and won't last no more But not skinned in a love song is split from the bone Do not tamper with the corn of the farmer The farmer's corn in a love song have just started to rise Do not mock/look down on our <i>Mek Mulung</i> performance For our <i>Mek Mulung</i> performance in a love song we have just started to learn</p> <p>.....</p> <p>*Free pantun section</p> <p>Here comes the serenade to the beach of Naning Elephant riders in a love song and their two children with adore  We who have come here from afar, Joining along in a love song the company of others</p> <p>.....</p> <p>We can't be enthralled no more by poetry, We rested beside amaranth knowledge of the elders,</p>

<p>Kami buang lah tasik di pusat tasik,</p> <p>Pusat tasik dah janji dipauh canggi</p> <p>Jangan menjadi dah reda seksakan reda,</p> <p>Jangan menjadi dah papa itulah papa</p> <p>Jangan menjadi lah malin cerai gemalin</p> <p>Kami buang dah tasik di pusat tasik</p> <p>Kami beradu di bayan guru</p> <p>Radu slalu lah eeeeh</p>	<p>We removed the lake from the heart of the lake,</p> <p>Anchoring on a promise rooted from the sea</p> <p>Let's not disturb the present calm,</p> <p>Let's not deprive further of poverty,</p> <p>*do not become like the story of Malin</p> <p>We removed the lake from the heart of the lake,</p> <p>We rested beside amaranth knowledge of the elders</p> <p>Resting along lah eeeeeh</p>
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Lagu Panggil Nenek Moyang (excerpt)

<u>Lagu pangge Nenek Moyang</u>	(English translation)
Silo eee lah yang turun nak oii tok guru oi muda	Please eee descend down the oii the elder guru oi the younger guru
Silo eee lah yang turun turun segera oii tua	Please eee descend down, down this instant the elders
Silo eee lah yang turun nak oii segera oi muda	Please eee descend down this instant oii the young
Silo eee lah yang turun nak oii segera tok nenek	Please eee descend down this instant our ancestors
Silo eee lah yang turun nak oii segera tok guru	Please eee descend down this instant our guru
Silo eee lah yang turun nak oii lah dewa lah tujuh	Please eee descend down oii the seventh god
Silo eeh lah yang turun nak oii tok dewa kesakti	Please eee descend down oii the enchanted god
Silo eee lah yang turun nak oii tok muda lah laknir	Please eee descend down oii the younger elder of the lightning
Silo eee lah yang turun nak oii tok dewa kesuma	Please eee descend down oii the elder flower god
Silo eee lah turun nak oii tok dewa oii raja	Please eee descend down oii the elder god oii king

**Appendix F: *Mek Mulung* Melodic Phrase Chart (adapted from Nur Izzati, 2014)**

Basic Phrase	Performed example in Wang Tepus
<p>A.</p> 	
<p>B.</p> 	
<p>C.</p> 	
<p>D.</p> 	
<p>E.</p> 	
<p>F.</p> 	

<p>G.</p>	
<p>H.</p>	
<p>I.</p>	

### Appendix G: *Mek Mulung* Song Titles and their Motifs

Song\ Description	Function Type	Song Function	Sung by	Melodic Motif	Reciprocal answer pic-up style
<u>Bertabik</u>	Opening	Opening Salutation	Raja/ <i>Puteri</i> / Older Member of the group	A, then B	Overlap
<u>Gerak Timpuh</u>	Opening	Opening Dance sequence	<i>Puteri</i>	B	Overlap
<u>Masuk Dalam bilik Ayaq</u>	Opening/ Travelling	Opening Dance Sequence	<i>Puteri</i>	A	End and start
<u>Makan Pinang</u>	Opening	Opening Lament	<i>Puteri</i>	B	Overlap
<u>Burong Odang</u>	Calling	Calling servants in a polite manner	<i>Puteri</i> / Raja	E	Overlap
<u>Inang/Awang Terkejut Jaga</u>	Calling	Calling servants in a harsh manner	<i>Inang</i> / <i>Awang</i>	A	End and start
<u>Berjalan</u>	Travelling	Travelling	Any character	A	End and start
<u>Pecah Lakon/ Berkhabar</u>	Intention	Determining the story	Raja/ <i>Puteri</i>	C or D	Overlap
<u>Timang Welu</u>	Calling	Calling upon a higher rank character	<i>Awang</i> / <i>Inang</i> / <i>Puteri</i>	F	End and start
<u>Mengulit</u>	Activity	Lullaby	<i>Puteri</i>	H	End and start
<u>Masuk ke Taman</u>	Activity	Entertainment in the garden	<i>Puteri</i>	G	Overlap
<u>Kecil Milik</u>	Closing	Mark the end of the performance	<i>Puteri</i> / Raja	I	End and start
<u>Nenek Moyang Turun</u>	Trance	Trance	None specific	H	End and start



**Appendix H: Performing Structure by the PPAG performances showing the  
Number of Performers visible on stage in a Major Section**

<i>Cahaya Bulan</i> (2002)	<i>Malim Bongsu</i> (2007)	<i>Dewa Muda</i> (2010)	<i>Cahaya Bulan</i> (2011)
<b>Opening Section:</b> 1. <u>Bertabuh</u> = E – movements of D enters 2. <u>Gerak Timpuh</u> + 4 instrumental dances + <u>Berjalan ke Bilik Ayaq</u> = P + D: 12	<b>Opening Section:</b> 1. <u>Bertabuh</u> = E – movements of D enters 2. <u>Gerak Timpuh</u> + 3 instrumental dances + <u>Berjalan ke Bilik Ayaq</u> = P+D:12	<b>Opening Section</b> 1. <u>Bertabuh</u> = E – movements of D enters 2. <u>Gerak Timpuh</u> + 3 instrumental dances + <u>Berjalan ke Bilik Ayaq</u> =P + D:14	<b>Opening section</b> 1. <u>Bertabuh</u> = E – movements of D enters 2. <u>Gerak Timpuh</u> + instrumental dances + <u>Berjalan ke Bilik Ayaq</u> =P +D:12 3. <u>Makan Pinang</u> =P
<i>Puteri</i> is introduced = P	<i>Puteri</i> is introduced = P	Raja is introduced=R	<i>Puteri</i> is introduced = P
<i>Puteri</i> summons <i>Inang</i> = P+ I:6	<i>Puteri</i> summons <i>Inang</i> = P+ I:7	Raja summons <i>Awang</i> =R	<i>Puteri</i> summons <i>Inang</i> = P+ I:7
Raja is introduced=R	Raja is introduced=R	Raja sings <b>Pecah Lakon/Tangkap Lakon</b> =R+A:2	Raja is introduced=P+R
Raja sings <i>Berhabar</i> =R+P	Raja summons <i>Awang</i> =R+A:I	<b>Plot of story</b>	Raja summons <i>Awang</i> =R+A:2
Raja summons <i>Awang</i> =R+A:I	Raja sings <b>Pecah Lakon/Tangkap Lakon</b> =R+A:1	<i>Puteri</i> is introduced post <i>Pecah Lakon</i> =P	Raja sings <b>Pecah Lakon/Tangkap Lakon</b> =R+A:2
<b>Plot of story</b>	<b>Plot of story</b>	<i>Puteri</i> summons <i>Inang</i> = P+ I:7	<b>Plot of story</b>
<b>Closing Song</b> = P+D(?)	<b>Closing Song</b> = P+D:10+I:7+O:6	<b>Closing Song</b> = P+D:8+O:17	<b>Closing Song</b> = P+D:10+O:14

Legend: E=Empty centre stage movement (excludes musicians); D=Dancers; P= Puteri  
I=Inang; A=Awang; R=Raja; O=Other Characters

Numerals refer to number of characters present on stage at that point of time

Note: The question mark in the Closing Song of the 2002 *Cahaya Bulan* performance is due to a faulty in the performance recording.